Chapter 1

Julian was born with a white name in a brown family. His parents had named his brother Efraín without hesitation. But by the time Julian came along, they'd already started watching their neighbors change their names on job applications and drop accents when answering the phone.

So they named him Julian — the English way. Not Hoo-lee-ahn, like the priest had said during the baptism. But Joo-lee-uhn, like the teacher would say on the first day of school.

The southern town wasn't unkind — just incurious.
It smiled politely as it quietly sorted people into their places.
And Julian, who lived somewhere between all the usual categories, never quite settled into any of them.

At home, his mother simmered frijoles negros for hours while telenovelas whispered from the tiny TV in the corner. She had a way of blessing everything — meals, bruises, the mailman. His father worked construction, spoke to wood like it was holy, and only softened when dancing to cumbias in the kitchen with a screwdriver in one hand and his wife's waist in the other.

The house smelled like cumin, sweat, and bleach. It was alive.
But outside the front door — it was church bells, flags, and baseball.
English-only signs. Eye contact that lasted one second too long.
Teachers who asked if he was legal like they were asking if he'd stolen something.

Julian learned early to live in the in-between. To roll his R's at home and swallow them at school. To eat plantains for breakfast, Pop-Tarts at lunch, and wonder if it was okay to love both. He didn't mind not belonging. But he hated being understood too quickly.
Because the people who understood him never really did.

Julian's parents met in the most romantic place imaginable: a holding cell in Laredo. His mother used to say it like it was a line from a telenovela. "I saw your father in that cell and knew I'd either marry him or kill him. There was no in-between." They were both crossing the border — not together, but close enough in timing that by the time they were caught, they were sharing a cement bench, a foil blanket, and a mutual hatred for the cold cheese sandwiches the guards handed out.

Mama was from Puebla. Papa was from Monterrey. But neither of them could agree on who started talking first. She said he was staring too long and mumbling about tortillas.
He said she was yelling at the guards in Spanish and it was the most beautiful war cry he'd ever heard.

Somehow — and this part always changed depending on who was telling it — a nearby Catholic church had tagged them as part of a refugee wave fleeing cartel violence. Whether or not it was true didn't seem to matter. Papers were filed, a nun with kind eyes made a few phone calls, and next thing they knew, they were on a church van headed to a safe house in San Antonio.

That's where it all began.
Not love.
Paperwork.

Love came later. After Papa fixed the broken sink in the kitchen, and Mama realized he wasn't half as dumb as he looked. She married him because "he was good with his hands and worse with his mouth — which meant he couldn't talk his way out of things." Papa always added, "She married me 'cause she was tired of arguing with strangers and wanted someone she could argue with forever."

They lived in Texas for a few years. Worked hard. Saved more than they spent. Had Efraín.
But then something strange happened: they got a flyer in the mail advertising homes in South Carolina.
Julian once asked why they moved.
Mama said, "Because the house had a porch."
Papa said, "Because it was cheap."
But really? It was because they wanted stillness.

The neighborhood they moved to was mostly white at the time — the kind of place where people waved from across the street but locked their doors when the waving stopped. It wasn't hostile, just… unseasoned. The taco shells were crunchy and the salsa was ketchup with ambition. Mama didn't even bother asking where to find cotija — she just started bringing her own in bulk.

But over time, the block began to change.
A Dominican family moved in down the street. Then a Guatemalan couple. Then some Salvadorans.
Before long, the neighborhood sounded like a mixtape: merengue, reggaetón, kids yelling in Spanglish, and lawnmowers that wouldn't start.

Mama called it la bendición del sazón.
Papa called it finally some real tortillas around here.

Julian was too young to remember the early days, but he could feel the contrast like a texture on his skin — soft at home, stiff outside. Spanish in the morning, English at school. Chisme with the cousins on Sundays, football on TV with confused commentary.

And always, always, laughter.
Even when things were hard.
Especially when things were hard.

Chapter 2

Julian didn't burst into adolescence — he tripped into it like a kid stumbling into a screen door.

For a solid two years, he looked like a baby deer halfway through a transformation spell.
His ears had grown ahead of schedule — two little satellite dishes poking out like they were trying to catch a signal from a cooler universe. His smile was 80% teeth, all slightly too big for his face, and he had the kind of unfortunate cowlick that made his hair part directly down the middle, no matter how many times Mama tried to comb it the "right" way.

It didn't help that his voice cracked like an old cassette tape and his limbs never seemed to agree on what direction they were walking.

Still, he wasn't invisible.
Not exactly.

By eighth grade, he started to stretch out — just a little. His cheekbones showed up like they'd been hiding under the baby fat. His teeth settled into their rightful places. And those ears? Well, they didn't shrink, but his face finally grew into them like a hand-me-down shirt that somehow fit one day.

That's when the girls started noticing.
They started giggling when he answered questions in class. Offering him gum for no reason. Laughing too hard at his jokes, even when they weren't funny. One even wrote him a note that said "You have nice elbows :)" which confused him for days.

Julian didn't dislike the attention — he just didn't feel it the same way.

He'd smile back. Be polite. But there was always this tiny disconnect, like someone giving him a present for a holiday he didn't celebrate. The rhythm was off. He knew what was supposed to happen next — he'd seen it in movies, heard it in the hallways — but something inside him stayed quiet.

It wasn't until later that he realized he had been waiting for

something different.
Not prettier. Not softer. Just… real. Unfiltered. Unafraid.

And that didn't come wrapped in a scented note or a flirty look from across the cafeteria.

At the time, he figured he just wasn't ready.
What he didn't know was that he was already ready — just not for what everyone else expected.

Her name was Eliza, and she was Julian's favorite kind of person: the kind who didn't care what people thought until she absolutely did — and then she made up her own rules anyway.

They met in sixth grade when she beat him in a timed multiplication test and then gave him half her granola bar in apology. She had a gap in her front teeth, one dimple, and a laugh that sounded like she was trying to hide it in her elbow.

By eighth grade, they were inseparable.
They passed notes in class, made up dances to early 2000s pop songs, and once tried to start a business selling "homemade slime" until her mom found the glue stash and shut it down.

It happened one afternoon on her porch.
They were sitting on the swing, swatting away mosquitoes and sipping orange soda from the can. Eliza was talking about how her cousin had kissed a boy behind the gym and didn't tell anyone for a week.

"I think people make too big a deal about first kisses," she said.

Julian shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe they're scared it won't be what they thought."

And then — no planning, no dramatic music — she just leaned in.

It was warm and soft, and a little fizzy from the soda on her lips.

And Julian, being Julian, let it happen.
He didn't pull away. He didn't panic.
He was in it — present, curious, even grateful.
But when it ended, he just sat there. Not smiling. Not stunned.
Just… still.

Eliza looked at him. "That wasn't bad," she said, laughing a little.
And Julian nodded, smiled back, said "Yeah," because it wasn't bad.
But it also wasn't… anything.

He didn't feel the lightning his friends had bragged about in whispered locker room stories.
He didn't feel the ache, the buzz, the spark.
Just a kind of silence — not the awkward kind, but the kind that made him wonder what he was supposed to be hearing.

That night, he remembered a conversation he'd had months earlier with a girl in science class named Priya.

She had anosmia — no sense of smell or taste.
She said she didn't even know anything was missing until the other kids started passing around perfume samples from the magazine and gushing about how good they smelled.

"I just nodded," Priya had said. "I thought maybe the smell was too faint or I had a cold. But then I realized… I wasn't smelling anything. At all. And it's weird, because I didn't miss it. Not until everyone started talking about it like it was magical."

Julian had nodded then, not knowing why it struck him.
But now he understood.

It wasn't that he felt nothing with Eliza.
It just didn't have a flavor.

And he didn't feel broken.
He just felt… like he'd been watching the wrong commercial his whole life.

Sundays in Julian's house weren't just for God — they were for starching shirts, warming tamales, and arguing over who stole the good rosary.

Mass wasn't optional.

Not even if you had a fever or a science project due.
Mama would lay her hand on your forehead and say, “You’re fine. Offer it up.”
Which, in her world, was holy code for stop complaining and let Jesus handle it.

The church smelled like old wood and melted wax.
And incense — that thick, sweet smoke that always made Julian feel like he was stepping into a secret. The pews creaked. The fans buzzed. And the statue of La Virgen by the altar wore a real blue shawl someone’s tía had crocheted.

But Julian’s favorite part wasn’t the music or the stained glass or even the whispered prayers that felt like lullabies. It was Father Benítez.

He wasn’t like the other priests.
He laughed too loud and told jokes during homilies. He wore sneakers under his robes and always kept mints in his pocket “just in case someone forgot to brush.”
But when he prayed — really prayed — time slowed down.

Once, after confession, Julian lingered.

He was maybe ten or eleven — too old to cry about dropping the Host during communion, but still young enough to feel guilty for accidentally saying oh my God during Mario Kart.

Father Benítez didn’t scold him. He just looked at him, really looked.
Then he sat on the little wooden bench next to him and asked, “Do you know what prayer really is?”

Julian shook his head.

“It’s not about saying the right thing,” the priest said. “It’s about being here. Just this. This moment. You and me. You and God. No fixing. No hurrying. Just paying attention.”

Julian didn’t fully understand it then, but it stuck.

After that, whenever life felt loud — when his brother was having an episode, or Mama was crying quietly in the laundry room, or he felt that unnameable ache in his chest — Julian would sit

somewhere still, close his eyes, and just… listen.

To the fan humming. To his own heartbeat.
To the sound of nothing, which wasn't really nothing at all.

He didn't always know what to pray for.
But he always knew how to be present.

And in a world that wanted quick answers and fast feelings, that was something sacred.
Even if he couldn't name it yet.

Efraín didn't talk until he was almost five.

Before that, he hummed. Low, rhythmic tones that sounded like the earth itself was breathing through him. He'd line up toys in perfect rows, flip pages of books without reading them, and scream if anyone turned off the ceiling fan — even in winter.

At first, Mama blamed el mal de ojo.
Papa said it was just a phase.
The pediatrician said "boys develop late."
But Julian remembered the day the word autismo entered their house like an uninvited guest.

It wasn't whispered.
It landed — heavy and strange, like a coat nobody had asked for.

They didn't know what to do with it.
No one around them did either. Their church offered prayers. A cousin in Houston sent an article from a magazine. The school said they'd "make accommodations" — but mostly, they just kept sending Efraín home for being "disruptive."

He wasn't disruptive to Julian.

To Julian, Efraín was a planet.
And the rest of the house simply orbited him.

It wasn't easy.
There were tantrums that shook the walls. Silent dinners. Locking the bathroom door just to breathe.
But there was beauty, too.

Efraín could tell when it would rain hours before the clouds rolled in. He'd lie on the porch and hum — his face turned upward like he was listening to something ancient. He had no use for lies or small talk or pretending. And sometimes, in rare bursts of clarity, he'd turn to Julian and say something like,
"Your face is loud today. You should go draw."

Julian was supposed to have his own rites of passage — confirmations, first crushes, awkward middle school dances.
But Efraín took up all the space.
Not in a selfish way. Just… completely. Like the moon pulling the tide.

And maybe that was a gift.

Because Julian's adolescence didn't come with pressure.
No one hovered over him, dissecting every mood swing or social hiccup.
The spotlight was elsewhere.
Which meant he got to grow in the shadows, slowly, gently — without being asked to explain himself too soon.

He figured things out at his own pace.
Learned to observe. To listen for things unspoken.
To speak when it mattered, and to stay quiet when the moment asked for stillness.

Efraín taught him that.
Without meaning to.
By simply existing — loudly, tenderly, truthfully.

So while other boys were being shoved toward manhood like cattle, Julian floated — not lost, but curious. Not rushed, but held.

And that made all the difference.

The world called Efraín's autism a disorder.
A diagnosis. A difficulty. A thing to be managed, medicated, mourned.

Julian never saw it that way.
To him, autism wasn't an affliction.
It was a mirror. A compass. A gift.

Where others saw dysfunction, Julian saw clarity.
Not easy — but honest.
Not polished — but real.

Efraín didn't play the games most people did.
He didn't fake-laugh to be polite.
Didn't sugarcoat his frustration.
Didn't adjust himself to make others comfortable.

He told the truth — sometimes too loud, sometimes too raw — but always, always, from the now.

While other kids learned to perform — to say what was expected, to smile when they were bored, to nod when they didn't agree — Efraín just was. Fully. Without permission. Without filter.

And that terrified people.
Because deep down, the world runs on polite pretending.
On nodding along even when your soul is aching.
On editing yourself to fit in.

Efraín couldn't — wouldn't — do that.
He wasn't unfiltered. He was unmasked.

Julian learned from that.

He learned that most people think connection happens when someone mirrors you — when they say "same!" or "me too!"
But with Efraín, connection came when Julian stepped out of himself.
When he stopped trying to be understood and started trying to understand.
When he sat in silence long enough for Efraín's world to open like a shy flower.

That's where he learned the skill no one teaches:
Curiosity as connection.
Presence as prayer.

Most people never learn that.
They think someone replying to them means they got through.
They confuse performance with presence.
They talk to be mirrored, not to be met.

But Efraín didn't mirror.
He didn't nod to be nice.
He told you if your voice was too loud or your shirt too scratchy.
He'd walk away mid-conversation if the light flickered wrong.

Julian used to think it was rudeness.
Then he realized: it was honesty.
Brutal, beautiful honesty.

And the downside of that honesty — the world didn't fit him.
To Efraín, society felt like a scratchy, oversized sweater with the tag still on.
Everything rubbed the wrong way.
The fake smiles. The loud fluorescent lights. The obligation to say "I'm fine" when you weren't.

So sometimes, Efraín screamed.
Not to scare anyone.
Not to hurt anyone.
But because his body didn't know what else to do with all that discomfort.

And Julian never forgot that.

Because when he looked at his brother, he didn't see brokenness.
He saw a soul allergic to bullshit.
A boy who felt everything.
A boy who didn't try to survive the world by blending in — but by holding on to the truth.

And that became Julian's secret superpower:
Not fixing.
Not performing.
But leaning in.

Lean in when someone is different.
Lean in when you don't understand.
Lean in when the world feels loud, and listen for what's soft underneath.

Efraín taught him that.
Not with words.
With being.

Efraín didn’t mean to hurt him.
Not ever.

But pain doesn’t always come with intention.
Sometimes it comes with fear. With noise. With a world too bright and too loud.

Julian learned early that love wasn’t always gentle.

The first time Efraín hit him, Julian was twelve.
He didn’t remember what set it off — a blender maybe, or the doorbell ringing too many times.
One moment they were in the living room. The next, Efraín’s fist was in his ribs and Mama was screaming his name like it was a prayer.

He didn’t cry.
Not because it didn’t hurt — it did — but because he saw it in Efraín’s eyes.
That foggy, vacant panic. Like someone else had borrowed his body and didn’t know how to return it.

The world called it a meltdown.
The school called it violent behavior.
But to Julian, it was a storm — not meant for anyone, just moving through.

He started to get used to it.
The bruises. The sudden shoves.
The way Efraín could go from humming to howling in seconds.

Mama stopped wearing earrings after Efraín ripped one out during a sensory episode.
Papa started patching up holes in the drywall without saying a word.
They all just… adapted.

But Julian changed.

He started going to the gym — not for vanity, but for control.
He was tired of feeling helpless.

Tired of having to hold his brother down with shaky arms and whispered reassurances.

So he trained.
His shoulders broadened. His arms thickened.
He filled in — not just his body, but his presence.

He didn't get strong to fight.
He got strong to hold.
To be a net when Efraín fell.

Because no one else could.
Not like he could.

People asked him why he was so gentle.
Why he didn't lash back.
Why he never pushed Efraín away — even when his nose bled, even when his back ached from restraining him on the floor.

But Julian never saw danger in his brother.
He saw misfiring signals.
A body too raw for the world.
A heart that never meant harm — only release.

The hardest part wasn't the pain.
It was watching other people look at Efraín like a monster.
Like a headline. Like something to pity or avoid or warn others about.

They didn't see the way he lined up his crayons by color and hue.
Or how he wept when a butterfly landed on his wrist and didn't fly away.
Or how he once pressed his forehead to Julian's and said,
"You're soft in the middle, like bread. I like that."

Julian didn't think strength was about dominance.
It was about holding space.
About staying.
About taking the hit — not to be a martyr, but to be a brother.

So he stayed.
Even when it hurt.
Especially when it hurt.

Because Efraín couldn't always see the world clearly.
But Julian could see him.
And that was enough.

Julian thought the gym would be simple.

Reps. Sets. Sweat.
A place where muscles spoke louder than words.
Where people grunted instead of talked and nobody asked questions as long as you racked your weights and wiped down the bench.

At first, that's what it was.

He went to train his body — to protect, to hold, to carry.
But the gym held another kind of energy he hadn't expected.
It buzzed. Subtle. Magnetic. Dangerous.

It started in the locker room.
A glance held too long. A laugh that hit the ribs just right.
The way one guy would clap another on the back, all bare skin and heat, like it didn't matter.

Julian felt it — not just attraction, but aliveness.
Something low in his stomach, something electric in his chest.
He'd stare a second too long at the curve of a back, the slope of a collarbone slick with sweat.

And then — snap.
He'd look away. Bury it.
Like stuffing incense smoke into a jar.

It wasn't that he was afraid of feeling it.
Julian had never been afraid of emotions — Efraín had taught him how to sit with them, even the loud ones.
No, this was different.

He wasn't scared of himself.
He was scared of them.

Because he had never seen a man welcome another man's affection.
He'd seen them welcome women.
Grin when a girl touched their arm. Puff their chest when she

smiled too long.

But affection from another man? That was another language entirely.
One you were punished for speaking.

Julian had seen it.
The way a boy in middle school got shoved into a locker for calling someone “cute” as a joke.
The way a cousin flinched every time the topic of “that one neighbor” came up.
The way love between men was treated like a threat — not to morality, but to manhood itself.

So he kept it quiet.

He stayed soft in his own head, while his body hardened in the mirror.
He became the kind of guy other men gave nods to. The kind they’d ask to spot them.
And still, inside him, there was this… ache.
Not lust. Not even longing. Just wonder.

What if this space — this temple of iron and effort — could also hold affection?
What if masculinity didn’t have to armor itself against tenderness?

But he didn’t ask.
Because the answers didn’t feel safe.

So he flexed and spotted and grunted like the rest of them.
He learned how to talk about gains and soreness and macros.
He fit in — physically.
And yet, he stayed behind a glass wall no one else seemed to notice.

Not because he didn’t want to connect.
But because in this place — unlike with Efraín, unlike in prayer — connection felt like a risk he couldn’t afford.

Not yet.

Julian met him at a party he hadn’t wanted to go to.

It was one of those backyard things — folding chairs, bad beer, fairy lights strung over a sagging fence. Too many people talking over each other. Too many dudes who called every song “a banger.” Julian was leaning against the cooler, bored out of his skull, when the guy walked over and offered him a drink he already had.

“Sorry,” the guy said, laughing. “Terrible opener. You looked thirsty.”

Julian just shrugged. “I am. But not for that.”

That made the guy smile. A slow one.
He had warm eyes, a chipped tooth, and arms that looked like they lifted things that mattered.

His name was Mateo.
He was open about being gay — confident, even. But something about the confidence felt… brittle. Performed.

Still, Julian was drawn in.
They talked for a while — surface stuff at first. Music, school, why South Carolina felt like a warm refrigerator in the summer.

Then Mateo touched his arm.

Not accidentally. Not playfully.
Intentionally.

Julian didn’t pull away.
He didn’t lean in either. He just… noticed.
How his body lit up a little. How the world got quieter.
How he felt seen — not admired, not pursued, but noticed, like a thought someone finally had words for.

They ended up in the empty garage, talking in low voices.
Mateo moved closer. The air changed.

Julian’s heart didn’t race. It opened.
Until Mateo leaned in, not with curiosity, but with certainty.

He whispered, “I can be whatever you need.”
And suddenly, it all turned.

Julian didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't this.
Not the way Mateo dropped his shoulders.
Not the way he tilted his head like someone taught him submission was currency.
Not the way he tried to shrink himself, to be pleasing — as if diminishing would unlock desire.

Julian's stomach turned.
Not with shame.
With sadness.

He saw something he'd seen before — but not in queer spaces.
He'd seen it in his mother when she apologized for her accent.
In classmates who laughed at racist jokes just to belong.
In himself, sometimes, when he held his breath in locker rooms and tried not to be too much of anything.

Mateo was doing it too.
Shrinking. Performing.
Reaching for Julian not with presence, but with a role — assuming Julian wanted to dominate, to claim, to own.

And Julian couldn't do it.

He stepped back.

Mateo blinked. "Wait—did I do something wrong?"

"No," Julian said gently. "You're just trying to be something I didn't ask for."

They stood in silence.

Julian wanted to reach out — not to kiss, but to connect.
But even now, even here, it felt like everything had a script.
And he wasn't ready to play a role just because someone offered it.

"I liked talking to you," he said.

Mateo smiled — but this one didn't reach his eyes.
"Yeah. Me too."

Julian left early. Walked home. Hands in his pockets, head full.

He wasn't scared of being gay.
He was scared of being boxed in.
Of desire turning into hierarchy. Of affection becoming currency.

He didn't want to dominate.
He didn't want to submit.
He wanted to meet.
To explore. To witness. To be witnessed.

But no one seemed to know how to do that.
Not yet.

Julian didn't have time to fall in love.
Not really.

His days were consumed — not by school or ambition, but by watching.
Watching Efraín's body for signs of tension.
Watching the corners of the room for things that might set him off.
Watching their parents — tired, aching, trying to be brave — pretend everything was fine.

Julian became an expert in holding things in.
Tension. Grief. Desire.

He didn't think of it as repression.
He thought of it as priority.

And so, while other boys were fumbling through hookups or sneaking into each other's basements, Julian built a rich interior world.
It was quiet there. No danger. No shame.
Just images — hands brushing, mouths exploring, sweat glistening on someone who saw him.

At night, after the lights were out and the house had settled into the soft hum of exhaustion, Julian would lie on his back and let the weight of the day melt into the mattress. His fantasies didn't start with sex. They started with presence.

Someone walking into the room and choosing him.
Not just for his body — but for the softness inside him that no one

had time for.
Someone whose touch didn't ask for permission because it already understood the answer.

Then he'd touch himself — slow, quiet, methodical.

The release helped.
Briefly.

Like scratching an itch without addressing the rash.
Like eating sugar to fill a hunger that needed something real.

Afterward, he'd lie there — warm, but unsatisfied.
A flicker of shame would pass through him, but not because of what he did.

It was because he knew he was using fantasy like a drug.
To soothe, not to connect.
To manage, not to feel.

He wanted more than release.
He wanted reflection.

But he was too tired.
Too afraid of what might happen if he stepped toward what he wanted instead of hiding behind it.
Too afraid of what would unravel if he allowed himself to need.

Because to need was to be vulnerable.
And Julian had spent his whole life being the strong one. The patient one. The one who stayed calm when others lost control.

There was no space for unraveling.
Not when Efraín needed him.
Not when his parents were held together by threads.

So he kept it in the dark.
The ache. The wonder. The longing.

And sometimes, as he drifted off to sleep, he wondered what it might feel like to not be the one holding everyone else up.
To be held.
To be wanted — out loud, in daylight.

But that was for another time.
Maybe.

Community college wasn't glamorous, but it was quiet.
And Julian had come to love quiet.

He was studying psychology — not because he had some grand plan, but because he wanted to understand why people acted the way they did. Why his brother unraveled when the air conditioner buzzed wrong. Why his parents loved with guilt hidden in their hugs. Why Julian could feel so much and still say so little.

Psychology gave him a language for things he'd spent a lifetime feeling.

The class was in a room that always smelled like burnt coffee and Expo markers. He sat near the back. Not to disappear — just to observe. Julian was good at that. Watching. Sensing. Catching the things most people missed.

That's when he noticed Luke.

It wasn't some slow, romantic recognition.
It was instant. Like the air shifted molecules.

Luke was tall, blond — too blond, almost — with a wavy top that curled when it rained and a fade that was almost too clean to be accidental.
He wore simple clothes. Fitted. Nothing flashy. His boots were scuffed but his jawline was sharp. He looked like the kind of man who could chop wood in the morning and quote the Bible by dinner.

And yet — there was a softness to him.
A stillness.
Something in the way he sat, like he was trying not to take up too much space.
Like he didn't want to be noticed, but wouldn't mind being seen.

Julian was used to the usual gym rats and class clowns — men who strutted like cartoons, who spoke in volume instead of meaning. Their bodies may have caught his eye, but they never held it. They

radiated closed doors. Zero entry points. Their presence screamed look but don't touch, and definitely don't feel.

But Luke?
Luke's door wasn't open — but it had a crack.
Just enough to let something through.

It wasn't overt. He didn't flirt. He didn't wink.
But Julian swore there was something—chemical.
Like Luke was unknowingly leaking a kind of pheromone that only certain people could smell.
Not an invitation, not exactly. But a glitch in the mask.

Julian didn't move toward him.
He wouldn't have known how.
Not here, in a room full of girls twirling their hair and guys trying too hard to sound deep.

He just… watched.
Listened.

Luke spoke once that week, during a discussion on behavior theory.

"Sometimes people aren't trying to manipulate you," he said.
"They're just trying to survive."

It landed.
Not just in the room — but in Julian.

He had no idea what Luke meant by it.
Maybe nothing.
Maybe everything.

He kept his eyes on his notes.
But his body remembered that voice. That presence. That tiny, flickering crack in the door.

It would be a while before either of them stepped through it.
But something had started.

And Julian, who had always been so good at sitting in silence, suddenly felt the noise inside him grow just a little louder.

Julian was sitting alone under the rusted awning near the side entrance of the student center, legs stretched out, the afternoon sun settling into golden hour. In his lap, a foil-wrapped bundle was slowly leaking orange grease through the creases.

His mama had packed him tacos that morning — carne asada, onion, cilantro, and her green salsa that could make a grown man cry. She wrapped them lovingly in aluminum foil like she always did, triple-layered, "para que no se enfríen." But by lunch, they'd steamed themselves into a soft, wilted mess.

They were soggy. Misshapen. Impossible to eat without making a mess.

Julian ate them anyway.
Not out of obligation, but out of gratitude.
Each bite tasted like care. Like someone thought about him before the sun came up.

He was licking salsa off his thumb when he heard someone say, "Are those… breakfast tacos?"

Julian looked up.
It was Luke.

Standing there with his hands awkwardly tucked into his back pockets, like he didn't know what to do with himself. His hair was extra wavy that day — humid air, maybe — and his face was flushed, like he'd either been running or overthinking his approach for the last twenty minutes.

Julian blinked, his mouth full.
He chewed slowly, buying time.

"Uh. Nah," he said after swallowing. "They're just tacos. My mom packed them."

Luke nodded. "Cool. They smell good. Spicy?"

Julian tilted his head, still unsure what was happening. "A little. Want one?"

Luke held up both hands quickly. “No, no — I wasn’t fishing. Just… I’ve never had homemade tacos like that.”

Something about the way he said homemade made Julian pause.

It wasn’t judgment.
It wasn’t even curiosity.
It was something else — like Luke had walked over expecting to say one thing, and now wasn’t sure why he’d said anything at all.

There was a flicker of silence between them, full of things neither knew how to name.

Julian wiped his fingers on a napkin. “You’re in my psych class, right?”

Luke seemed surprised by the shift. “Yeah. You’re the guy who never talks.”

Julian smirked. “I talk. Just not out loud.”

That made Luke laugh — short, genuine, caught off guard.

And in that moment, Julian noticed it again — the glitch.
The way Luke’s face flickered between calm and panic.
The way his shoulders stayed tight, like they didn’t trust the softness trying to emerge.

He could feel it — that Luke’s insides were a mess.
Tangled. Unsettled.
But not cold. Not cruel.

Just… armored.

And Julian, who had spent his whole life leaning into storms, leaned in now.

Not with a question. Not with a touch.
Just by staying.

He held Luke’s gaze a moment longer than usual. Let the silence stretch, not as discomfort, but as invitation.

Luke looked down, then back up. “Anyway,” he said, voice a little thinner, “see you in class.”

And then he was gone.

Julian watched him go, the foil in his lap cooling in the breeze.
His tacos were lukewarm now.
But something else in him had been lit — slow, cautious, but real.

Not a crush.
Not yet.

Just a door.
Cracked a little wider.

Julian was ruggedly handsome in the kind of way that didn’t announce itself.
Not polished. Not curated.
His beauty wasn’t a billboard — it was a campfire.
Something you noticed when you got close enough to feel the heat.

His skin was olive-toned, kissed by sun and lineage, with an undertone that seemed to glow under warm light. It looked soft — and it was — but it stretched over muscle that had been carved slowly, not for aesthetics but for purpose. For holding, lifting, restraining, surviving.

His hair was thick and black, the kind that defied gravity and gel, always falling slightly out of place.
His eyes, deep-set and dark, weren’t sharp like daggers — they were pulls. Like gravity.
They didn’t pierce you.
They invited you in.

People who got too close often forgot what they were saying.
But Julian didn’t notice.
He’d never been told he was beautiful.

Not really.

In a world full of white beauty ideals — clean jawlines, freckled noses, golden tans that could be washed off — Julian’s beauty

didn’t register in the algorithms of desire.
He wasn’t on the posters.
He wasn’t on the dating apps.
He wasn’t what people pointed to and said, “That.”

He was what they noticed after.
In the quiet.
When the performance was over.
When their bodies leaned closer without asking.

He moved like someone unaware of the effect he had.
He didn’t flex, didn’t flirt with mirrors, didn’t fish for compliments.
He just was — raw, steady, low-simmering.

His masculinity wasn’t loud.
It was carried in his voice — slow, intentional.
In his hands — large, calloused, careful.
In his stillness — how he could hold a gaze without trying to dominate it.

Julian didn’t lead with his looks because no one ever taught him that he could.

His attraction wasn’t just physical — it was felt.
In the way people breathed differently around him.
In the way even the most self-assured grew self-conscious in his silence.

And when he laughed — which wasn’t often, but was always genuine — it changed the whole shape of a room.

But most people didn’t get close enough to see all of that.

And Julian?
He didn’t need them to.

He wasn’t trying to be seen.
He was trying to see.

It was between classes, the kind of passing period where the halls buzzed with footsteps and half-finished conversations. Julian leaned against the wall just outside his psych lecture, earbuds in but

nothing playing — a habit he'd picked up to avoid small talk. His eyes drifted across the hallway, lazy and half-lidded, until they landed on him.

Luke.

He was standing near the water fountain, sipping, facing away. Then—he turned.

Their eyes met.

And something passed between them.

Not recognition.
Not yet.
But attention.

Like two people in a silent room realizing the music had stopped.
A quiet shift.
A weight in the chest.
Like the hallway itself had gone still.

Neither of them moved.

Julian held the gaze longer than he meant to.
Luke didn't look away.
If anything, he leaned into it, just slightly — not with his body, but with his being.

And just as the air tightened, like something wanted to start—

"Julian?"

A voice broke the spell.
A light, breathy voice with perfect timing and even whiter teeth.

He blinked. Turned.
It was a girl from their psych class — Brielle, maybe? Blonde, confident, all highlighter and perfume.

"Hey," she said, stepping closer. "So, um… I was wondering if you could help me with the last unit. I'm seriously struggling, and you're like, way better at this stuff than me."

Julian nodded without thinking. “Yeah, of course.”

Brielle smiled wider, leaning just slightly into his space. “Cool. Maybe we can study at my place?”

He hesitated.

She didn’t.

Julian, always open to experience, always curious, didn’t read too much into it. He just said, “Sure,” and smiled back.

Across the hall, Luke watched it all happen.

Watched Julian’s posture shift — not stiffen, just bend slightly, the way he did when trying to meet someone where they were.

Watched Brielle reach out and gently touch Julian’s arm as they walked off together.

And something in Luke retracted.

It was subtle. A blink. A step back.

He hadn’t known what he was going to do. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything.

But whatever had just passed between them — that quiet, invisible thread — had been cut.

To Luke, it looked like confirmation.
That Julian was straight. That he had options. That maybe the softness he thought he saw in Julian was just projection.

And Luke, who had learned all his life how to protect the parts of him that ached, swallowed it down like a bitter pill.

He turned. Walked away.

He never saw Julian look back.

Because Julian did.
Just once.

And when he did, the spot where Luke had been was already empty.

Brielle became a fixture in Julian's days the way music slowly fills a room — not with force, but with rhythm.

It started with study sessions, always casual.
She'd bring iced coffee, he'd bring snacks his mom had packed, and they'd sit cross-legged on her carpet surrounded by notes, notebooks, and whatever scented candle she was obsessed with that week.

Then they started walking to class together.
Not always planned — but expected.

She talked a lot.
Julian liked that.
She filled the air with stories and tangents and dramatic reenactments of text conversations with her friends.
Julian listened — not passively, but attentively — the way he always did when he cared.

And he did care. He liked her laugh, the way her voice cracked when she got too excited, the way she leaned in when she talked, like the world was a secret only she and Julian were in on.

She started calling him Jules. He didn't correct her.

She met his parents once — unplanned.
She had come by to drop off his charger and ended up staying for dinner.

Mama loved her immediately.
"Qué bonita, tan educada," she whispered to Julian in the kitchen while handing him tortillas.

Even Efraín seemed calm around her. He didn't flinch when she spoke.
At one point he looked up from his seat, pointed to her neon nail polish, and said, "Your fingers look like candy."
She laughed, not out of politeness, but because she genuinely thought it was the best compliment she'd ever gotten.

After that, she was in.
At least in her mind.

Julian liked her presence.
She didn't ask too much of him.
She let him be quiet. Let him be.

He felt something with her — a closeness that was warm and safe, like sitting near a fireplace without needing to speak.
He figured this was what other people called love.
Or at least… a version of it.

He didn't think to question it.
Because she seemed happy.
And he was happy, in his way.

But Brielle's feelings weren't staying still.

Her attraction, which had begun with the outline of his body and the depth in his eyes, had started to evolve.
Julian wasn't just hot — he was real.
He remembered things she said. He noticed when she changed her hair. He once brought her soup when she was sick, still warm in the thermos and wrapped in a towel to keep it from spilling.

And she fell — slowly, then all at once.

She mistook his stillness for mystery.
His gentle distance for flirtation.
His kindness for intent.

Because no one had ever made her feel like she mattered without also asking for something in return.
Except Julian.

She didn't know that he loved differently.
That to him, this kind of closeness wasn't a step toward more — it was the more.

He didn't touch her often.
But when he did — a hand on her shoulder, brushing hair from her face — it meant something to her.
She felt seen. Desired. Chosen.

Julian didn't know any of this.
He thought they were on the same page.
He thought this was what friendship could be — intimate, rich, without needing to be sexualized to be real.

But the gap between intention and perception was beginning to widen.

And neither of them saw it coming.

It happened on a Thursday night.

They were studying again — or pretending to.
Brielle had her legs draped over his lap, a half-empty bag of chips between them and some moody playlist humming through her Bluetooth speaker. She was talking about dreams she kept having, about running through fields, about how weirdly happy she felt lately.

Then she kissed him.

Soft at first, like testing the water.
Julian didn't pull away.

He told himself this was just another new moment — not like before.
Not like the kiss with Eliza when he was younger, where he had felt that familiar silence in his chest.

This time, he tried to lean in differently.
He tried not to let his past script the present.
He told himself this could be something new. That maybe love really was about choosing someone and growing the rest from there.

Brielle wanted him. That was clear.
She moved with certainty. Confidence.
He followed — not because of desire, but because of care.

It wasn't passion. It wasn't electricity.
It felt like… giving a kid everything they asked for on their birthday.

Not out of joy — but because it was their day.
And you wanted them to feel special. Wanted. Celebrated.

Brielle moaned his name.
Julian stayed quiet.

Afterward, she curled into him, her fingers tracing lazy shapes on his chest. She looked satisfied — not just physically, but emotionally. Like something had clicked. Like she'd arrived.

Julian hadn't.

He stared at the ceiling, his hand resting lightly on her back. He didn't feel shame.
He felt… hollow.

Not because of her.
But because he had crossed a line that didn't feel true to him — a line he hadn't fully understood until it was behind him.

He didn't sleep that night.

The next day, he asked if they could talk.
Brielle met him at the same side entrance where they always used to hang out.

Her smile faltered the moment she saw his face.

"I need to tell you something," he said gently.

Her body tensed. "You're breaking up with me?"

"I don't think we were ever… together like that."

"Julian, we had sex," she snapped, suddenly defensive. "You were there. Don't act like that didn't happen."

"I was there," he said softly. "But not like you were."

She folded her arms, trying to find balance. "You kissed me back. You… you touched me. You said yes."

"I know." He looked down. "I said yes because I care about you.

Because I wanted to give you what you wanted. I thought maybe that would open something up in me that wasn't there yet."

"And it didn't?"

He shook his head.

She stared at him. Her voice dropped, unsure. "So… what are you saying? That you're… what? Confused?"

"No," Julian said, finally lifting his eyes. "I'm saying I'm attracted to men."

The words didn't crash. They didn't echo.
They just landed. Heavy. Final.

Brielle blinked, as if trying to recalibrate the room.
"But we had sex," she said again, quieter this time. "You seemed like you… you liked it."

Julian nodded slowly. "I liked being close to you. I liked you. But what I felt… it wasn't desire. It wasn't connection, not the way you felt it."

She didn't respond. Her mouth opened, then closed. Her face tried on a few expressions and rejected them all.

"I thought…" she started, then trailed off. "I thought we had something."

"We do," Julian said. "Just not the thing you thought. And I'm sorry. I should've known myself better before I said yes."

Brielle looked away, her eyes glinting. Not from anger — from hurt.

Julian wanted to reach out, but didn't.

"I didn't mean to lead you on," he whispered.

"I know," she said after a long silence. "But it still feels like you did."

She walked away, slow at first, then faster.
Julian didn't follow.

He stood there, alone, as the wind picked up and blew leaves against the wall behind him.

He didn't regret telling the truth.

But it didn't feel like relief.
It felt like grief.
Like something kind and beautiful had been crushed under the weight of misunderstanding.

And still—
It was the first time he had said it out loud.

And the truth, even when it hurt, felt more real than anything he'd done in silence.

The kitchen was warm with the scent of garlic and simmering beans.
His mother moved with rhythm — chopping, stirring, humming something soft in Spanish that Julian didn't recognize but felt anyway.

He stood by the counter, holding a glass of water he hadn't taken a sip from.
His heart was loud.
Not frantic — just present.

"Mamá," he said quietly.

She didn't look up. "Hmm?"

"I need to tell you something."

She stirred the beans a little longer, like she hadn't heard.
But she had. She always did.

"Is this about Brielle?" she asked after a beat.

He nodded, even though she wasn't looking.
"Yes. And… about me."

Finally, she turned, wiping her hands on a towel, the lines in her face drawn tight with knowing.

“She’s a good girl,” she said. “Sweet. Polite. Educated. She likes you.”

“I know,” Julian said softly.

“We like her too. Your papá says she has strong arms like your abuelita.” She smiled a little at that. “Even Efraín likes her. You know how rare that is.”

“I know,” he repeated.

“So then what is this really about?” she asked. “You miss her?”

Julian inhaled, steady and full.
“No. Mamá… I told her the truth.”

“What truth?”

He paused.

“That I’m attracted to men.”

The words didn’t explode.
They landed.

His mother blinked slowly, like trying to understand a foreign phrase she knew the translation for but had never expected to hear from her own child.

“No, mijo…” she said gently, walking toward him. “You’re confused. That girl loved you. You just got scared. Don’t throw away something good.”

“I’m not throwing anything away,” Julian said, his voice still calm. “I’m being honest.”

“Julian.” Her voice was firmer now. “You and Brielle had something. That doesn’t happen by accident. People spend whole lives looking for that. Why complicate it?”

He shook his head. “Because it’s already complicated when I’m not living in truth.”

She stepped closer, put a hand on his chest — the same chest she'd once rocked to sleep, the same chest now thick with muscle, holding a heart she didn't fully understand.

"You don't know what that life will be like," she whispered. "It's hard. It's lonely. People can be cruel."

"I know," Julian said. "But I've already lived most of my life lonely. Quietly. Hiding the best parts of myself from people I love."

She looked at him like she was searching for the boy she raised inside the man standing before her.

"You never told me you felt this way."

"I didn't have the words," he said. "And when I did… I didn't know if they'd hurt you."

Her eyes welled up, but she didn't cry.
She wasn't angry.
Just… heartbroken in a way that didn't blame anyone.

"I liked her," she said again, quieter this time.

"So did I," Julian said. "But not the way she needed. I care about her too much to keep hurting her just because it's convenient for everyone else."

She stared at him for a long time.

And then, softly:
"Is this who you are?"

Julian nodded. "It always has been."

The silence that followed wasn't cold — it was sacred.
A pause between waves.

His mother reached up and cupped his face.
Her thumb brushed his cheek like she was drawing the cross there.

"I don't understand it," she said. "But I love you. That part won't change."

Julian felt his throat tighten.
This wasn't full acceptance.
But it was an open door.

And for the first time, he stepped through it with both feet.

Julian graduated with his degree in psychology on a Thursday in May.

He didn't make a big deal of it.
No cap toss. No staged photoshoot with balloons and champagne. Just a tight hug from his mamá, a rare smile from his papá, and Efraín handing him a folded piece of paper that simply said: "Your brain is big."

Julian kept that paper in his wallet for months.

But a degree was only a piece of the journey.
To work in prisons — to become the kind of person who could sit across from someone at their lowest and not flinch — he needed grad school. And grad school needed money.

So he got a job at a mechanic's shop off a back road near the county line.
It smelled like oil and metal and sometimes weed. The boss was a quiet man with rough hands and a soft spot for anyone who showed up on time. Julian did.

He worked the front desk at first — answering phones, ordering parts, translating when needed. But before long he started learning the work itself. Changing filters. Replacing belts. Cleaning carburetors. There was something soothing about it — the way machines made sense, the way every problem had a part, a cause, a fix.

He'd go home with grease under his nails and aching wrists, but it was honest work.
It gave him time to think.
And the thinking was part of the mission.

Because Julian wasn't just trying to get a job.
He was trying to understand people.

And he knew — the ones who end up in the system?
They don't break for no reason.
They snap under pressure. Under pain. Under lives that never gave them the language to say: I hurt.

He wanted to be someone who listened.

———

Meanwhile, Luke had taken a different path.

After community college, he enrolled in the police academy.
It felt like a natural fit. Discipline, routine, strength.
It gave him purpose. Gave him something to point to when the world asked what he was.

And that's where he met Kyle.

Kyle was the guy everyone wanted to be around.
The kind of cop who joked with the instructors, drank like a teenager on spring break, and always had a story about "what really goes down on the street."
He was loud, unfiltered, and a little reckless.
But he knew the system. He knew how to work it.
And he made Luke feel like one of the boys.

Kyle took him out after drills.
Bought his beers. Called him "golden boy."
Taught him how to walk like a cop. How to talk like one.
How to carry just enough hardness to not be questioned, but not enough to be feared.

Luke laughed more around Kyle.
Drank more.
Pushed deeper into the tribe, even as something in him stayed quiet.

There was still a part of Luke that remembered a pair of dark eyes across a hallway, a moment that almost became something.
But memory fades when everyone around you is cheering for the version of you they can understand.

And Kyle understood this version of Luke.
Straight. Sharp. Strong.

So that's the one Luke became.

———

And in two different corners of the same Southern sprawl,
Julian and Luke lived lives that didn't intersect—
but kept curving toward each other, quietly,
like rivers finding their way home.

Luke was the kind of handsome that didn't surprise anyone.
He had the kind of face people trusted without knowing why.
Golden skin that always looked kissed by the sun, wavy hair with just the right amount of mess to suggest effortlessness, and eyes the color of faded denim left out in July. Gray, but warm. Familiar.

In the South, he was what people called a good-looking boy.
The kind your mama would pray for.
The kind who could be reckless and still be forgiven because he smiled when he said yes, ma'am.

He didn't have to work for attention.
He just had to walk into the room.

And in the small Southern town he grew up in, that meant something.

Most homes had two flags.
The stars and stripes always flew first — bold, proud, faded from too much sun.
And sometimes, below it or across the yard on a bumper sticker, the shadow of another flag fluttered — the Confederate one.

Nobody talked about it like it meant hate.
They called it "heritage."
Or "just family history."
Or "Uncle Ray being Uncle Ray."

It was like having a cousin who made everyone uncomfortable at Thanksgiving — someone you didn't endorse, but didn't uninvite either.

Luke grew up surrounded by those contradictions.

His street was middle-class. Lawns mowed. Dogs barked at fences.
Football games on Fridays.
Every home had a grill and a church.
The only difference was the music coming out of those churches.

The older generation stuck to hymns — organs, robes, sermons that stretched like molasses.
The younger ones? They preferred stage lights, denim jackets, and pastors who quoted Drake before scripture.
Luke's parents didn't love that shift, but they tolerated it.

So long as he kept going.
So long as he said grace and didn't come home with piercings or politics.

God was part of the air there.
And so was masculinity — thick and quiet and polished like a rifle passed down from your granddad.

Boys didn't talk about feelings.
They talked about football, fishing, and the price of gas.
Vulnerability wasn't weakness — it just didn't exist.

Luke learned to fold himself into that shape early.
To walk tall. To nod instead of speak.
To offer strength instead of softness.

And it worked.
People liked him.
They called him solid.
A good one. Raised right.

But under the gold dust and Sunday charm, something quieter stirred.
A part of him that didn't know how to speak the language he was born into.
A part of him that noticed the way his pulse quickened when the quarterback changed in the locker room.
A part of him that flinched whenever a sermon veered too far into sin.

It was easier to laugh. To blend in. To do what was expected.

The police academy was designed to break you down and rebuild you.
Push-ups at sunrise. Drills in the rain.
March in line, don't ask questions, know your place, know your partner's back like it's your own spine.

Luke was good at it.

He already knew how to be quiet.
How to nod instead of speak.
How to carry a weight that didn't have a name.

That's where he met Kyle.

From the moment Kyle swaggered into orientation, he owned the room.
Big-shouldered, big-mouthed, and always laughing a little too loud.
He had tattoos under his sleeves, the kind that looked like stories he'd never actually tell.
He had the kind of body that looked like it could take a punch and like it probably had.
Confident. Charismatic. Crude in a charming way.

Luke hated how much he wanted to be near him.

It wasn't sexual—at least not in any way Luke allowed himself to admit.
It was magnetic. Familiar. Comforting in its chaos.

Kyle made everything simple.
You were either in the tribe or you weren't.
And Luke, for once, felt invited.

He followed Kyle like a shadow.
Laughed at his jokes. Took the shots he handed him.
Listened to stories about hook-ups and bar fights and how "pussies these days don't know how to be men anymore."

And Kyle?
He called Luke rookie or golden boy, but it never felt demeaning.
It felt like a nickname you earned. Like a rite of passage.

Luke told himself he wanted brotherhood.
But it wasn't just that.

He wanted closeness.
He wanted to be seen.
He wanted to be known in a way that didn't require him to confess anything.

And Kyle offered that.
Touch without tenderness.
Proximity without suspicion.

Just like Brielle had offered Julian.

Luke remembered her. Remembered the look in her eyes when she laughed too loud at Julian's jokes.
The way she hovered, trying to be chosen.
He hadn't understood it then. But he did now.

Because he was doing the same thing.
He wasn't drawn to Kyle's politics or his arrogance or even his jokes.
He was drawn to his presence.
The way he made the world bend around him.

Luke told himself it was brotherhood.
That the flutter in his chest when Kyle grabbed him in a headlock or slapped his shoulder too hard was just adrenaline.

He didn't dare call it desire.

So instead, he did what he always did:
He hooked up with girls.

Not out of passion. Not out of curiosity.
But out of strategy.

He gave out just enough evidence to keep the world convinced.
He played the part well — hands, breath, grunts, the whole act.
Then he ghosted. Ghosted all of them.

Not because he was cruel.
But because it was never about them.

It was about not being found out.
It was about stacking enough alibis to keep his secrets safe.

Because what he wanted — what he really wanted — was the kind of thing men like Kyle laughed off or beat down.
And Luke?
He wasn't ready to lose the tribe.

Not yet.

It was supposed to be just a few beers after drills.
The usual dive — pool table, jukebox, dollar wings on Wednesdays. The kind of place where everyone smelled like smoke, sweat, and nostalgia for a simpler time that never really existed.

Kyle was in rare form that night.
Loud, magnetic, the center of every circle.
He'd just nailed a tactical assessment and was riding high — buying shots, cracking jokes, slapping backs.

Luke followed, like always.
Close, smiling, a step behind.
The golden boy in Kyle's gravity.

That's when he walked in.

A kid — barely twenty-one, maybe younger — with dark skin, a fitted crop top, and eyeliner that caught the dim neon light like glitter.
He didn't belong in that bar, and everyone knew it.
But he walked in anyway, head high, a quiet dare written across his shoulders.

Kyle noticed him immediately.
His smirk changed. His posture sharpened.

"Well, would you look at this?" he said, nudging Luke, voice pitched just loud enough for a few heads to turn. "Didn't know it was open mic for fairies tonight."

Luke stiffened.
The joke hit his ears like static.

“Leave it,” he said quietly. “He’s just ordering.”

But Kyle didn’t.
He never did.

He sauntered over — slow, casual, full of venom wrapped in charisma.

“Hey, princess,” he said to the kid. “Lost your parade?”

The kid didn’t flinch. He rolled his eyes, turned back to the bar.

That should’ve been the end of it.

But Kyle never liked being dismissed.

What happened next happened fast.
Words. Shoving. A drink spilled.
The kid tried to walk away, but Kyle grabbed his arm — too tight, too fast.
The kid shoved back.

And suddenly, Kyle wasn’t playing anymore.

Luke stepped forward. He could’ve stopped it.
He should’ve.
But Kyle looked back at him — eyes blazing, adrenaline thick in the air — and Luke hesitated.

Just for a second.

And that was enough.

The kid was slammed to the floor.
Punches. Shouts. The crash of a barstool.
Luke grabbed Kyle and pulled him back, but too late.

Security broke it up. The kid was bleeding. His lip split. His eye already swelling.

Someone called the cops.

They came.

Took statements.
Witnesses spoke — some unsure, others afraid.

The next day, charges were filed.
Assault.

But the kid was Black.
And Kyle and Luke?
They were poster boys for the academy.
One white, one golden-skinned and clean-cut.
“No record.”
“Top of the class.”
“Boys just made a mistake.”

The kid was painted as provocative.
As unstable.
As someone who “came looking for trouble.”

Luke got a warning.
Kyle got a brief suspension.

The academy called it “unbecoming conduct.”
They made them write apology letters they never sent.

And Luke?

He couldn’t sleep for three nights.

Not because he threw a punch — he didn’t.
But because he didn’t stop the one that mattered.
Because his silence had been permission.
Because he had looked at someone who reminded him of himself — soft, brave, defiant — and turned away.

For the first time, Luke wasn’t sure if he admired Kyle anymore.

For the first time, he felt dirty in a way no shower could fix.

Luke confronted Kyle the next day.

They met behind the training center near the maintenance sheds, where no one really walked unless they were sneaking a cigarette or blowing off steam.

Kyle leaned against the chain-link fence like he owned it.
Arms crossed. Sunglasses on. That smirk carved into his face like it had never left.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Luke said, voice tight. “You went too far.”

Kyle didn’t flinch.
“Please,” he said. “That little freak came in begging for it. You saw it.”

Luke shook his head. “He didn’t touch you until you grabbed him.”

Kyle chuckled. “Christ, Luke. Don’t start sounding like Internal Affairs.”

“I mean it,” Luke snapped. “That wasn’t some bar fight. That was —”

“What?” Kyle interrupted, pushing off the fence. “A hate crime? Is that what you’re gonna say next?”

Luke’s jaw tensed.

Kyle stepped in close, too close, lowering his voice.
“You’re taking this awful personal, golden boy. What, something about that kid hit a little too close to home?”

Luke’s stomach dropped.

He didn’t answer.

Kyle tilted his head. “You got something you wanna say, Luke?”

Luke looked at him — at the friend, the brother, the mask — and saw someone who would never let him say it.

So he said nothing.

Just turned and walked away.

———

That afternoon, the academy announced a ten-day suspension for both officers “pending review.” Officially, it was about optics. Unofficially, it was about giving everyone space to cool off before the press caught wind.

Luke left town without telling anyone.

Luke went home.

Ten days off, unpaid.
The academy didn’t call it a suspension — just a “cooling-off period.”
No press. No paperwork. Just space.
The kind that wasn’t offered to the kid in the crop top, whose name Luke had learned and couldn’t forget.

Home was a modest single-story on a dead-end street where neighbors still waved even if they didn’t like you.
The grass was patchy, the shutters were faded, and the porch had two rocking chairs — one for his mama, one that had stayed empty since his dad passed.

The American flag still flapped out front, tethered to the white wooden post like a promise someone else had made.
His old truck was parked in the same spot.
Same rust along the bumper.
Same greasy smudge on the steering wheel.

Everything was the same.
Except him.

His mama met him at the door with a hug that smelled like Downy and overcooked rice.
“You look tired, baby,” she said, cupping his face.
“I’m fine,” Luke muttered.

She didn’t press.
She never did.
She just made chicken and dumplings and called it enough.

He spent the first few days in his old room — wood panel walls, football trophies collecting dust, a framed Bible verse that read “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

The irony didn't land gently.

The town hadn't changed.
The same guys were still working at the gas station.
The same girls from high school still posted Bible quotes under filtered selfies.
Even the dog across the street still barked at nothing like it had a grudge against the air.

But Luke was changing.

The silence started pressing on him.
Not the comfortable quiet of home — but the emptiness of who he had to be to stay liked here.
He walked into the diner and felt the old version of himself snap back into place, like armor sliding onto skin.

"How's the academy?" people asked.

"Great," he lied.

No one asked more.
They liked answers that came wrapped with a bow.

But Luke couldn't stop thinking about that night.
The kid's face. The blood. The look — not of fear, but disappointment.
Like Luke had confirmed everything he was afraid the world would be.

And Kyle's voice still echoed: "You're taking this awful personal."
"You got something you wanna say, Luke?"

For years, he hadn't.

Not even to himself.

Instead, he chased girls.
Not for love, not even for lust — but for proof.
Proof that he was one of the boys.
Proof that whatever else lived inside him could be buried under enough football games, cheap beers, and the smell of someone else's perfume.

But lately… the proof wasn't working.

And in the quiet of his childhood home,
Luke began to realize that not knowing who you are was one kind of pain.
But knowing, and refusing to say it —
that was a different kind of hell.

Luke found his mama in the living room, folding laundry like it was the only thing holding the house together.

The television was on low — a rerun of a sermon from a pastor they both knew but never really liked. He had too many teeth and never blinked when he spoke. Luke muted it.

"Mama," he said, sitting on the edge of the couch.

She looked up, surprised. They didn't usually have talks.
Not serious ones, anyway.
Not since he was a kid asking why God made mosquitos or if dogs go to heaven.

"Yes, baby?"

He looked at the folded socks. Then at her.
Something in his chest ached to know something true.

"Do you think we'd still be Christians if we were born in India?"

She froze, her hands hovering over a t-shirt. "What kind of question is that?"

"A real one."

She blinked. "Well… no. I mean—of course we'd still believe in Jesus."

Luke tilted his head. "But we'd be born into Hinduism, or Islam, or something else. We'd have never even heard of Jesus."

She didn't like that. He could see it on her face — the tightening.
The polite panic.
Like he'd asked her to explain math in front of strangers.

“The Bible says He’s the way, the truth, and the life,” she said, a little too quickly. “That’s what matters.”

“I’m not saying it’s not true,” Luke said carefully. “I’m just asking… do we believe because it’s true, or because it’s all we’ve ever known?”

She folded another shirt, her fingers stiff.

“I heard a sermon about this once,” she said. “About how people are called from all over the world. Everyone has a chance to hear the Word. Even if they live in a jungle somewhere. God makes a way.”

Luke smiled faintly. “That sounds convenient.”

She stopped folding. “What are you trying to say?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I guess I’m just… wondering if this is something we do because it’s true, or because it’s just what everyone does.”

She bristled. “We do it because it’s in the Bible.”

“But do you believe it?” he asked, gently. “Like, for yourself? Not because of Dad. Not because of Pastor Dean. Not because it’s Sunday and it’s what good people do.”

She didn’t answer.

The silence stretched.

Finally, she muttered, “You should ask your father. He’s the one with all the wisdom.”

Luke nodded slowly. That was her way of ending the conversation.

And that’s when it hit him:
He had reached a dead end.

Not because she didn’t care — she did.
But she’d never built her own foundation.
She’d inherited a house of belief and memorized every room, every

hallway, every answer she'd been handed.
But no one had ever taught her how to ask questions.

If he asked his father, it would be worse.
His father wouldn't entertain the conversation.
He wouldn't pause or soften.
He'd shut it down like slamming a book shut before the ending.

Because to his dad, questions were threats.
Doubt wasn't a doorway — it was sin.
And God?
God needed to be protected.
Like Santa Claus — if people stopped believing, the whole thing might collapse.

His father was the kind of man who confused defending God with understanding Him.
The kind who thought silence meant reverence, and fear meant faith.

Luke leaned back into the couch, exhaled.

"Okay," he said softly. "Thanks."

His mama gave him a tight smile and went back to folding.
But her hands shook a little now.

That night, Luke sat in the truck long after he'd parked it in front of the house.

The porch light glowed like it always had. The flag above it fluttered gently in the breeze. Nothing had changed.

Except inside him, everything was moving.

He couldn't stop thinking about the kid Kyle had attacked.

The eyeliner. The quiet defiance. The refusal to shrink.

Luke didn't know if he was gay.
Didn't care.
That wasn't the point.

What haunted him wasn't what the kid represented — it was what

was taken from him.

A right to belong.
To exist without being punished for it.

Luke had watched that happen.
Had let it happen.

And for the first time in his life, the word injustice didn't just belong to history books or courtroom scripts.
It lived in his ribs now.
It burned.

He had always believed, deep down, that his job — as a man, as a cop-in-training, as a son of the South — was to protect.

But that night, he hadn't protected anyone.
Not even himself.

He remembered the feeling he had when he saw the kid hit the floor.
It wasn't just shock.
It was grief.

Like something sacred had been broken.
Like a connection — fragile and wordless — had been severed by a fist.

And then another memory came.
Uninvited. Vivid.

Julian.

Back in the psych class. Sitting across the room, head tilted slightly, fingers stained with pen ink and salsa grease.
Julian hadn't even looked directly at him that day, not for long.
But Luke had felt it.

Not attraction, not yet.
But something else.

Wonder.

Julian had carried himself differently than anyone Luke had ever

known.
He didn't fill space — he opened it.
He moved like someone who didn't need to be understood to feel whole.
There was an aura of exploration around him — like he lived in a constant state of asking questions, even if he never said them out loud.

Luke hadn't known how to talk to someone like that.
Julian didn't just seem different — he was different.
Not in a way that made him stand out, but in a way that made the world around him look flat by comparison.

Back then, Luke had chalked the feeling up to admiration.
Maybe even envy.

But now…
He wasn't so sure.

Because that feeling he had in his chest — the one he got when Julian had smiled softly to himself while eating those foil-wrapped tacos —
That pull…

It was the same kind of ache he felt now.
The same flicker of what if.

And for the first time in his life, Luke didn't shove it away.
He didn't label it or try to bury it under someone else's perfume.
He let it rise.

What if it had been Julian, instead of that kid at the bar?

What if he had stood there, frozen, while he was bleeding?

Luke gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles went white.

This was the beginning of something.

Not a conclusion.
Not yet.

But curiosity.

Real curiosity.

The kind that didn't look for answers — just the truth.

Luke had wanted to hang out with Colton — just the two of them, like old times — so they checked out a new retro shop that had just opened. Vintage games, old arcade cabinets, the kind of place that smelled like dust, plastic, and nostalgia.

It was getting late when they finally headed back. The gas light had come on long before they got there, but now it was unavoidable — they had to stop.

The nearest station wasn't dangerous, exactly.

But it wasn't familiar either.
And for Luke, unfamiliar often translated to uneasy.

It wasn't the kind of neighborhood he grew up driving through. Wasn't the kind of place where people waved at you just because.

Colton, as usual, didn't care.

He was relaxed in the passenger seat, feet on the dash, flipping through his phone like they weren't pulling into the part of town that made Luke's jaw tighten.

Luke kept his hand on the gearshift a little longer than he needed to, eyes scanning the lot before he stepped out.
Luke:
"You excited about graduation?"

Colton:
"Kind of. Mostly nervous. I don't know if I'm ready for all that comes after."

Luke is surprised by the honesty. He nods.

Luke:
"Yeah. I get that."

A beat.

Colton:
“Did you feel ready when you graduated?”

Luke wants to say yes. But he doesn’t.

Luke:
“No. I just… did what I thought I was supposed to do. Took the job, got strong, stayed quiet.”

Colton looks at him.

Colton:
“You still think that’s what you’re supposed to do?”

Luke can’t answer. He thinks of Julian.

Luke and Colton are in Luke’s old truck, the gas light glowing orange.

Colton
“You ever gonna fix that sensor?”

Luke
“I like to live dangerously.”

They both chuckle, but the laughter fades as they pull off the highway into a part of town neither of them really knows. Buildings sag. The gas station sign flickers. It’s not dangerous. Just unfamiliar. That’s enough to tighten Luke’s jaw.

Colton notices. He looks out the window at a small group of people on the sidewalk. Kids on bikes. A man with a shopping cart. A woman braiding someone’s hair on a porch.

Colton
“Doesn’t feel that dangerous.”

Luke (dry)
“People always say that right before something bad happens.”

———

As they pump gas, they hear shouting across the street. A large manis in the middle of the sidewalk, flailing and shouting, panic swelling in waves. He punches a trash can. People scatter, but no one screams. No one runs. They're used to this.

Someone pulls out their phone—not to record, but to call someone.

Colton
"What's happening?"

Luke
"Shit."

They watch as a well-built man jogs up. He's not wearing anything remarkable — just jeans and a loose sweatshirt — but he steps into the chaos like he belongs in it. There's no hesitation. No posturing.

He approaches the agitated man with his hands slightly raised — not in surrender, but in invitation.

Colton (gesturing)
"You think he knows him?"

Luke (eyes narrowing)
"…I don't know."

The aggressive man lashes out suddenly — a solid strike to the chest. The calm man stumbles but doesn't raise his fists. He breathes. Stays close. Doesn't flinch.

Another hit.
Then another.

Luke leans forward in his seat, tense. He's stepped in for less than that before.

Luke (half-whispers)
"Why isn't he stopping him?"

Colton (quietly)
"He is."

Luke doesn't respond.

He doesn't understand — not yet — but something stirs.
Something like shame.
Something like awe.

Another blow lands, and for just a second, the calm man turns his head.

And Luke sees his face.

Recognition strikes — not a blaze, but a spark.
He knows that face.
But from where?

Colton
"Should we help?"

Luke (quietly)
"…Let's go."

———

They drive in silence for a while. Colton keeps glancing at Luke, waiting.

Colton
"That was… intense."

Luke
"Just a guy having a breakdown."

Colton
"No, I mean that guy. The one who showed up. He wasn't afraid. He —he was just there. Like really there."

Luke says nothing. His jaw clenches. He grips the steering wheel tighter than he needs to.

Colton
"You okay?"

Luke
"Yeah."

But he's not.

The young man's face lingers in Luke's mind like smoke in his lungs. The calm. The pain. The knowing in his eyes. And something else—something that looked a lot like… freedom.

———

Luke lies in bed. It's late. The room is dim, lit only by the soft flicker of an old rerun playing on the TV. He's not watching. Hasn't been for a while.

His eyes are open, fixed on the ceiling.

That face keeps floating back.
The way the man stood still as he was struck — over and over — and didn't even blink.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't fight back.

That calm—Luke's never seen it before.
Not in the streets.
Not on the force.
Not even in his pastor.

Luke (to himself):
"Where do I know you from?"

He rolls over, grabs his phone. Scrolls without focus, opening and closing apps like muscle memory.

But it won't let go.

The image replays in his head like a haunting:
The man stepping forward, hand slightly out. Not in surrender — in invitation.
Not reacting — seeing.

Like he was looking through the chaos.

And wasn't afraid of what he saw.

That's what made Luke shiver.
That look.

Like he wasn't trying to control the moment.

He was with it.

Luke tries to sleep. He closes his eyes.

But that man is there again — not peaceful, but fully present. Holding the other man. Maybe bleeding. Maybe crying. But not breaking. Not hiding.

It shakes Luke.

Not because it was weak.
But because it wasn't.

———

The next morning Colton walks into the kitchen. Luke is already there, still in last night's clothes, coffee in hand. He's staring out the window.

Colton:
"You didn't sleep."

Luke:
"Just thinking."

Colton:
"About that guy?"

Luke doesn't answer. But his silence is the answer.

Colton:
"I saw the way you looked at him."

Luke:
"What does that mean?"

Colton:
"Like you were trying to remember a dream you weren't supposed to forget."

Luke looks at his brother, the air tense—but something softens in him. He doesn't push Colton away. Not this time.

Luke finishes the last few weeks of the academy like someone walking through fog. The lectures, the drills, the forced camaraderie—all of it feels hollow now. Before, he was hungry to prove himself. To belong. But something's changed.

The instructors still bark. The cadets still laugh at Kyle's crude jokes. But Luke's laughter feels taped-on. Like wallpaper that's started to peel in the corners, revealing a wall he didn't know was crumbling underneath.

He catches himself zoning out. Thinking about Julian. About Colton. About the moment Julian took a punch and didn't flinch. Not out of fear. But out of choice.

Luke starts questioning things in class—softly, subtly. His questions are met with raised brows. "You getting soft on us?" Kyle smirks during sparring drills.

Luke doesn't respond. But Kyle's hits sting more than they used to.

———

The moment graduation ends, his mom is already planning the party. The church basement is decked out in blue and silver streamers. A long table filled with crockpots and casseroles. A cake that says Congratulations Officer Luke! in red and blue frosting.

He stands awkwardly in the center, shaking hands with people who speak of him like he's already become a savior.

"We're so proud."
"You're gonna protect this community."
"We need more men like you."

He smiles. He nods. But inside, he feels like a statue—polished and hollow.

———

After most of the guests have gone, Luke steps outside to breathe. His dad follows, hands in pockets. They sit on the concrete steps outside the church, under a low pinkish sky.

Dad:
“You did good today.”

Luke:
“Thanks.”

A pause.

Dad:
“Now it’s time to start thinking serious. You’ve built the foundation, now it’s time to build the house.”

Luke says nothing. His father continues, his voice calm, as if reading off a checklist.

Dad:
“You’re not meant to do this alone. Just like Adam. God said it —‘It’s not good for man to be alone.’ You need a partner. A wife. Someone steady. You find a good girl, build a home. That’ll support your career, give you stability.”

Luke:
“…You think that’s all it takes?”

Dad:
“What else is there?”

His father’s tone is transactional. Strategic. Like life is just a series of building blocks—career, wife, kids, church.

Dad:
“Love comes later. You build first. You work. You provide. That’s what men do.”

Luke feels like the words are pressing against him. He looks down at his hands—hands that had once held Julian’s face. Not in sin. In awe.

He wants to scream. But he just says:

Luke:
“I’m tired, Dad. I’m gonna head home.”

Dad:
“Think on what I said. The right girl will make everything click into place.”

Luke walks off. But nothing is clicking. Everything is shifting. And Julian’s eyes keep showing up in his dreams—calm, wounded, steady. The kind of presence that no curated life can fake.
SCENE: “Day One”

Luke stands in the locker room, straightening his uniform in the mirror. He should feel proud. Accomplished. But the badge feels heavier than expected. He adjusts it, then lets his hand drop. No more academy. No more pretending. This is real now.

———

Luke is paired with Officer Holmes—seasoned, lean, buzz cut with weathered eyes that have seen too much to care anymore. He’s not cruel. Just… practiced. Efficient. Detached.

They sit in the cruiser. The radio crackles.

Dispatch:
“Disorderly at the gas station off Elm and Oak. Possible transient harassing customers.”

Holmes:
“Same guy as last week, probably. Let’s roll.”

As they drive, Holmes munches on sunflower seeds, flicking shells into a paper cup.

Holmes:
“Word of advice: Don’t get too involved with these types. They’re not looking for help. They’re looking for attention.”

Luke:
“Shouldn’t we—”

Holmes:
“—treat ‘em like people? Sure. But people can still be pests. Just be firm. Don’t let them suck you in.”

———

They pull up. The man is pacing near the pumps, shirt half-open, muttering to himself. Customers are giving him wide berth.

The clerk watches nervously from inside the store. No one’s been hurt. No weapons. Just tension.

Holmes (getting out):
“Alright, let’s wrap this up.”

He approaches the man with a practiced tone—not threatening, but not human either.

Holmes:
“Hey, buddy. Time to move along. You’re making folks nervous.”

The man keeps muttering. Doesn’t resist, but doesn’t leave either. He keeps pointing to the sky, mumbling something about angels and fire.

Holmes (to Luke):
“You’re up. Good first rep.”

Luke walks up slowly. The man glances at him, eyes wild but not hostile. There’s a flicker of recognition in Luke—something in this man’s fear, in his fractured way of seeing the world.

Julian would’ve knelt. Would’ve asked his name. Would’ve tried to understand.

Luke just says:

Luke:
“Sir, we’re gonna need you to move away from the gas station.”

Man:
“Fire… it’s all fire.”

Holmes cuts in, annoyed but measured.

Holmes:
“Let’s not make this harder than it needs to be. Move it, or we’ll move you.”

Eventually, the man shuffles off, muttering. No cuffs. No real altercation. But Luke watches him go like he’s watching a ghost disappear down the street.

———

Back in the car, Holmes speaks like he’s ticking off boxes.

Holmes:
“See? Quick, clean, no drama. You’ll get used to this. Most of the job is just cleaning up after people’s worst days.”

Luke doesn’t respond. He stares out the window, watching the man disappear into the shadows.

He wonders if this job is going to make him forget what people look like when they still have something left in them.

Julian wouldn’t have let that man walk away unseen.

And Luke can’t unsee that anymore.

Holmes adjusts the air vent and settles into the driver’s seat like it’s a recliner. He tosses the last sunflower seed shell into the cup and wipes his hands on his pants.

Holmes:
“You see that guy? That’s what happens when you give up. This country—say what you want about it—it gives you chances. More than most places. But people like him? They don’t want help. They want to be victims.”

Luke stays quiet, eyes scanning the street as they slowly pull out of the lot.

Holmes (continuing):
“Back in my day, you’d take any job you could. Clean bathrooms, flip burgers, whatever. You worked. You didn’t end up like that unless you were lazy. Or weak.”

Luke shifts in his seat, jaw tightening slightly. He doesn’t explode—he’s not there yet. But something in him stirs. He thinks of Efraín. Of Julian’s eyes. Of how human that homeless man looked when he pointed to the sky.

Luke:
“…I don’t know. I think there’s more to it than that.”

Holmes (glancing over):
“Oh yeah? You got some social work degree I don’t know about?”

Luke:
“No. I just… I don’t think it’s that simple. Some people don’t get the same start. Or maybe they did and something broke along the way. Family. Health. Trauma.”

Holmes (snorts):
“Trauma? Everybody’s got trauma. You walk it off. You don’t pitch a tent on the sidewalk and start preaching about fire.”

Luke’s silence now is heavier—he’s biting down on a hundred things he doesn’t have words for yet. But inside, a dam is cracking.

Luke (softly):
“I think… some people just need to be seen. Not solved. Just… seen.”

Holmes scoffs, taps the steering wheel.

Holmes:
“Good luck with that approach, rookie. This job’ll teach you—some people don’t want to be seen. They want to drag you down with them.”

They drive on in silence, but Luke is somewhere else—somewhere in the space between compassion and compliance. And Julian’s face drifts back again.

———

It’s a slower day on patrol. Holmes leans back in the passenger seat, arms crossed, clearly enjoying his role as supervisor.

Holmes:
“Alright, rookie. You drive. Let’s see how you handle her.”

Luke nods, trying to stay cool. He pulls out from the curb, the cruiser grumbling under his control. Everything’s fine—until they get a minor call: suspicious vehicle parked too long outside a fast-food joint.

Luke responds quickly, maybe a little too quickly. He turns too tight pulling into the narrow lot and scrapes the bumper hard against a concrete barrier. There’s an awful sound—metal on cement.

Luke (tense):
“Shit.”

He parks, breath shallow, stepping out to look at the scuffed, cracked corner of the bumper. Not catastrophic, but definitely noticeable.

Holmes (stepping out, calm):
“Well, there goes your perfect record. Two hours in.”

Luke’s heart sinks. He starts apologizing, rambling about responsibility and protocol.

Holmes (laughing):
“Relax. You didn’t kill a nun. Happens to everyone. I crunched the same side when I was a rookie.”

He pulls a card from his wallet, scribbles something on the back, and hands it to Luke.

Holmes:
“Take it here after shift. Manny’s Garage. Tell ’em Holmes sent you.”

—

The garage is tucked into a quiet part of town, half-hidden behind a row of aging oak trees. The sign is faded but clean. The air smells like oil, metal, and coffee.

Luke steps inside, holding the referral card. The bell above the door jingles. Inside, it's all warm lights, concrete floors, and the sound of a socket wrench clicking in rhythm.

Julian (off-screen):
"Be right with you."

Luke hears the voice. It freezes him in place. Familiar. Clear. Then Julian rounds the corner from beneath a car, wiping his hands on a rag.

They lock eyes.

A beat.

A long beat.

Julian's expression doesn't falter, but something flickers in his eyes —recognition. Surprise. Maybe even relief.

Julian (calmly, lightly):
"…Didn't think I'd see you on this side of a badge."

Luke doesn't answer right away. He's stunned. There's a buzzing in his ears that drowns everything out except Julian's voice.

Luke:
"You… work here?"

Julian (grinning slightly):
"I live here."

A silence stretches between them—not awkward, but charged. A recognition that this isn't just a second meeting. It's a spark reigniting.

Luke (quietly):
"I didn't know you—"

Julian (gently interrupting):

“Yeah. I know.”

Julian steps forward, takes the referral card from Luke’s hand, brushing his fingers in the process. It’s subtle. But Luke feels it like static under his skin.

Julian:
“Let me take a look at the bumper. I’ll treat it like it never happened.”

Luke watches him kneel by the front of the car, sleeves rolled up, moving with precision and ease. And just like before, Luke is struck —not by the way Julian moves, but by how present he is. Like the noise of the world doesn’t touch him.

Luke realizes something.
He doesn’t want to leave the garage.

—

Luke sits in the backseat of a quiet Uber, watching the world blur past the window. The mechanic shop is behind him now, but something inside him is still there. Still standing in front of Julian. Still stuck in the way his name didn’t have to be said for everything to make sense.

The driver hums softly to some oldies playing low on the radio. Luke doesn’t hear the music. All he hears is that voice—Julian’s voice. That same steady calm from the gas station. From the garage. From—

And then it hits him.

Like a memory pulled from dust.

———

The sun is barely up. The garage isn’t officially open yet, but the bay doors are cracked. Luke parks his cruiser a block away—he tells

himself it's for discretion, but the truth is, he doesn't want anyone to know he's here.

He steps inside. The air is cool, still. The smell of oil and metal lingers like incense in a chapel. Julian is already at work, bent under the hood of a car, sleeves rolled up, grease on his forearm like charcoal brushstrokes.

Luke clears his throat.

Luke:
"Hey. Just wanted to check on the bumper."

Julian turns, wiping his hands with a rag. He gives Luke a long, amused look. Not mocking—just aware.

Julian (smiling):
"You know we usually just call the station, right? Someone picks it up. You didn't have to come all the way down here."

Luke freezes for a moment—caught.

Luke (awkward):
"Yeah, I just… figured I'd, uh, check on it. Make sure everything's good."

Julian:
"Everything's good."

A pause. Julian tosses the rag on the workbench, leans back against the hood of the car. His presence is unbothered. Open. He doesn't press, but he doesn't turn away either.

Julian:
"You always this eager to check on bumpers, or is it just me?"

Luke almost smiles. He looks at the floor, rubs the back of his neck.

Luke:
"Guess I just… wanted to see how things work around here."

Julian:
"Manny's Garage? Or… something else?"

The question hovers—not a trap, not a tease. Just… a door, cracked open.

Luke doesn't step through, but he doesn't shut it either.

Luke (gently):
"You ever think some places just… feel easier to breathe in?"

Julian (soft):
"Yeah. I do."

There's silence again—but it's thick with something living. Not sexual. Not flirty. Just two souls starting to orbit. Luke lingers, eyes scanning the walls, the cars, the soft hum of a radio playing something jazzy in the background.

Julian watches him without judgment, without expectation. Just presence.

Julian (breaking the silence, casual):
"I'm about to grab coffee. You want to stay a bit? The guy next door makes a mean pour-over."

Luke hesitates. Then nods.

Luke:
"Yeah. I'd like that."

And as they step out into the early morning light, Luke feels it again—that something. That quiet curiosity. That warm ache to be near someone who makes the world feel… clearer.

He doesn't know what it means yet.
But he knows he wants more of it.
He wants more of him.

—

The shop next door is small—just two stools at the counter, a chalkboard menu, and a barista with tattoos and a sleepy grin. The smell of fresh beans and baked things makes the whole place feel like a safe house tucked away from the world.

Julian orders confidently. Something dark and smooth. Luke just

says “same.”

They take their coffees to a bench outside. The sun has started to warm the street, but it’s still early enough for the shadows to stretch long.

They sit in a silence that doesn’t ask to be filled.

Julian takes slow sips. He glances at Luke. Luke’s eyes are fixed on something across the street, but not really seeing it. He’s tuned in to everything about Julian—the way he holds the cup with both hands, the way his shirt fits across his collarbones, the stillness that radiates from him like gravity.

Luke doesn’t want to talk.
He doesn’t want to explain.
He just wants to be here.

But Julian speaks gently, like he’s reaching out without touching.

Julian:
“You from around here?”

Luke (nods):
“Yeah. Born and raised.”

Julian:
“Big family?”

Luke (quiet):
“Somewhat, an older sister and a younger brother. Three is a crow nowadays”

A small smile flickers at that name.

Julian (lightly):
“Colton. That’s a good name.”

Luke glances over. Julian is watching him—not with scrutiny, but with presence. With interest. The kind that makes you feel like the most important thing in the room.

Luke takes a sip of his coffee. It’s too strong, but he doesn’t mind.

Julian:
“You always want to be a cop?”

Luke shrugs. A slow, tired gesture.

Luke:
“Felt like I didn’t have a choice.”

Julian doesn’t press. Just nods. He lets the silence return—but now it feels warmer. Like a blanket instead of a wall.

Julian:
“Sometimes the best part of a conversation is the quiet.”

*Luke looks at him. Really looks at him. Julian isn’t flashy. He’s not putting on a show. But there’s something magnetic about his stillness, about the way he doesn’t fill the space with noise or performance.

And suddenly, Luke thinks:
You’re beautiful.

Not just in your face.
Not just in your body.
But in the way you take up space without demanding it.

Luke shifts slightly on the bench. Not away from Julian—just to breathe.

Luke:
“Feels… easy. Sitting here.”

Julian (smiling):
“Yeah. I think that’s rare.”

They sip their coffee. The morning moves around them.

Luke still doesn’t know what this is. But for the first time in a long time, he’s not trying to figure it out.
He’s just letting himself feel it.

The sun is higher now, washing the sidewalk in soft gold. Their

coffees are nearly finished, and the world is beginning to stir around them—cars passing, shop doors opening.

Julian stretches slightly, the movement smooth, effortless. He glances down at his watch, then back at Luke with a gentle smile.

Julian:
“I should probably get back. Manny gets dramatic when I leave him with too many brake jobs.”

Luke blinks, pulled out of the quiet haze like waking from a good dream. He suddenly remembers: his shift starts soon.

Luke:
“Oh. Right. Yeah, I should head back too.”

They both stand. Julian lingers for a second, still facing Luke. There’s a small, open window here—an expectancy. Julian isn’t reaching for his phone, but he’s not walking away either. It’s in his posture. A kind of held breath. A subtle invitation.

Julian (lightly):
“Well… it was good seeing you again.”

Luke nods, hands in his pockets, unsure what to say or do with all the feeling still churning in him. He wants to say something, but the words catch in his throat. He’s never done this before. Never chased something that felt like this. Not without a script.

Luke:
“Yeah. You too.”

A pause. Julian smiles, but something flickers behind it—a softness giving way to disappointment. He takes a slow step backward, still watching Luke.

Julian:
“Take care of that bumper.”

Luke (quietly):
“Will do.”

Julian gives a small wave and walks back toward the garage. His stride is still calm, still composed, but there’s something a little

heavier in it now. Not rejection, just resignation.

Luke watches him go. Doesn't move.

Not until Julian disappears inside.

Only then does he whisper:

Luke (to himself):
"…Shit."

He gets in the cruiser. Sits for a long beat before starting it.

There was a moment there. He felt it.
But now he's not sure if it'll come back.

And he doesn't even know why he let it slip through his fingers.

Julian steps back into the garage. The shift from sunlight to fluorescent light is sharp. The scent of oil hits him again—comforting, grounding—but his mind's still out on that bench with Luke.

He sets his coffee cup on the workbench, slower than usual. His body is back in the shop, but his thoughts are pacing.

Manny, hunched under a lifted Civic, shouts from beneath the hood with a wrench in hand:

Manny:
"You get lost or what? I thought you ran off to marry a hipster barista."

Julian (half-laughs):
"Just took a coffee break."

Manny (grumbling):
"Must've been good coffee. You came back looking like you just got dumped."

Julian snorts, grabs a clean rag, and leans against the tool chest.

Julian:
“I wasn’t dating anyone.”

Manny (popping out from under the hood, wiping his forehead):
“You don’t have to date someone to get dumped, mijo. Sometimes it’s spiritual. Sometimes it’s just vibe-based heartbreak.”

Julian smirks, folding the rag into quarters.

Julian:
“You ever try talking to someone who feels like staring at the sun? Like… warm, but you don’t know if it’s gonna burn you or make you come alive?”

Manny:
“Sounds gay.”

Julian (deadpan):
“It is gay.”

Manny (nodding, matter-of-fact):
“Bueno. Then sounds like you’re in trouble.”

He walks over, grabs a handful of lug nuts, tosses one in the air, and catches it.

Manny:
“This the cop guy?”

Julian (quietly):
“Yeah.”

Manny (mock dramatic):
“Dios mío. You’re into a cop. What are you, a telenovela?”

Julian chuckles but doesn’t respond. Manny notices the silence, sobering just a little.

Manny (softer):
“He look at you like he sees you?”

Julian (nods):

“Yeah. But then he looked away. Like he didn’t know what to do with what he saw.”

Manny walks over, claps a hand on Julian’s shoulder. He doesn’t say much for a beat—just lets the noise of the garage fill the silence.

Manny:
“Listen, cariño. Some people see the light and don’t know whether to chase it or shut the curtains. Doesn’t mean they didn’t feel it.”

Julian:
“I didn’t want him to chase me. I just… wanted him to say something.”

Manny (grinning):
“Maybe he will. If not, you got other things to chase. Like that transmission on the Subaru.”

Julian laughs again—genuine this time. The ache in his chest doesn’t disappear, but Manny’s words settle in. He’s not bitter. Just… disappointed.

He walks back to his station and slides under the next car.

But a piece of him stays outside, still sitting on that bench with Luke.

Still hoping he’ll come back.

—

The sky is fading to soft purple, streetlights humming to life as Julian walks home with his hoodie pulled up against the cooling air. It’s a quiet neighborhood—modest homes, chain-link fences, a few kids still playing basketball in a driveway.

Julian doesn’t notice the cruiser at first. But after a couple of blocks, he hears the soft crunch of tires behind him. Not fast. Not aggressive. Just… there.

He glances back. A cop car. No lights. No siren. Just trailing.

His stomach tightens—but not from fear. Not yet.

Another block.
Still there.

Julian's eyes narrow, lips parting in a dry breath. He cuts suddenly into a narrow alleyway between two garages, emerging a block over. He circles around, crossing through a shortcut he knows well.

When he reappears at the end of the street, he walks up to the cruiser slowly—confident, casual, like someone catching a friend in a lie.

He approaches the driver's side and bends slightly to look inside.

Julian:
"Stalking usually comes with a restraining order."

Luke jumps a little in the seat, then instantly tries to recover with a laugh that dies halfway out. His arm's on the steering wheel like he belongs there, but his face betrays him—composed, but flushed.

Luke (clearing throat):
"Was just… on patrol. This is, uh, part of my route."

Julian (arching a brow, grinning):
"Your route, huh? Must be fate, then."

Luke opens his mouth to respond, but Julian's leaning in now, arms on the window edge, face close enough to pull heat into the cruiser.

Julian (lightly teasing):
"You always do drive-bys on foot traffic you recognize, or am I just special?"

Luke (trying not to smile):
"…You're special."

A pause. The air thickens. Julian's grin softens into something a little warmer, something with intent. His eyes don't leave Luke's.

Julian:
"So. Where's your partner? Or is this an unsanctioned mission?"

Luke (quiet):

“Holmes is off tonight. I got solo rounds.”

Julian:
“Lucky me.”

Luke doesn’t know what to say to that. He’s still trying to act like this is nothing. Like he’s in control. But his knuckles are white on the steering wheel and he hasn’t blinked in ten seconds.

Julian (playful, then sincere):
“You know, next time, you could just say you wanted to see me.”

A long pause. Luke finally meets his eyes, really meets them—and in that moment, the air between them bends.

Luke (softly):
“Maybe I did.”

Julian gives a crooked smile and steps back, patting the window once.

Julian:
“Good. Then maybe next time, you’ll park.”

He turns and walks away, hoodie up again, but his stride has a rhythm now. A hum. He doesn’t look back—but he’s smiling.

—-

Luke pulls up slowly beside Julian on the sidewalk, window rolled down.

Luke (trying to sound casual):
“You want a ride?”

Julian looks at him for a beat—searching—but there’s no game in his eyes.

Julian (grinning):
“I live like… five minutes that way.”

Luke (shrugs):
“Five minutes is a long walk in those boots.”

Julian laughs and opens the door. He slides into the passenger seat, the car still smelling faintly like coffee and armor-all.

The moment the door shuts, something shifts.
It's quieter in here.
Smaller.
More charged.

Julian notices—Luke's arm on the wheel, taut under the short-sleeved uniform. The way his jaw moves when he's thinking of what not to say.

Julian (teasing):
"You clean up nice, Officer."

Luke (trying not to smile):
"Don't start with me."

They drive slowly, windows cracked, night air folding in around them. A little conversation floats between them—nothing heavy. Favorite music. The weirdest call Luke's been on. Julian's dream of opening a little shop that's half art studio, half mechanic bay.

But beneath it all is that unspoken something.
A current neither of them wants to break.

They pull up near Julian's block. Luke doesn't put the car in park. Just idles. Julian reaches for the handle—

—and then Luke does it.

He reaches out, hand closing gently around Julian's forearm and pulling him slightly back in, closer.

Luke (barely audible):
"Wait."

Julian turns. Their faces are inches apart.
This isn't bravado.
This isn't scripted.
This is new. Raw. And real.

Luke leans in. And Julian meets him halfway.

The kiss is slow, uncertain at first.
Then something clicks.
It deepens.

Luke's heart is pounding so loud he swears Julian can hear it.

Julian feels Luke's hand tense on his shirt—but what surprises him more… is himself.

He shifts slightly and—

Julian (breaking the kiss, eyes wide):
"…Shit."

Luke pulls back, blinking.

Luke (nervous):
"What—did I—?"

Julian (red, pointing at his crotch with a sheepish smirk):
"No, it's not that. It's just… your uniform's a problem."

A beat of silence.

Julian (grinning):
"I'm gonna need a minute before I can, uh… walk out."

Luke looks down. Then back up. And for the first time in forever, he laughs—a real, breathless laugh that shakes the weight off his chest.

Luke (laughing):
"Yeah… I think I do that to people."

They both sit there, laughing, the windows fogging up a little from the breath and the heat.

Julian leans back in the seat, relaxed now, watching Luke from the corner of his eye.

Julian:
"You know, you're terrible at patrol."

Luke:

“I’m improving.”
SCENE: “The Text Thread”
Later that night.

Julian’s home now—showered, in bed, lights dim, screen glowing. Luke’s shift just ended. He’s still in his uniform in the driver’s seat of his parked cruiser, but now he’s just staring at his phone, thumb hovering.

The screen lights up.

Julian:
Made it home. Crutch finally let me go.

Luke smirks and types back, fingers stiff but heart racing.

Luke:
Glad to hear it. Was starting to worry you’d need backup.

Julian:
I don’t know… I’ve never been restrained by polyester and authority before.

Luke pauses, blinks, then stares at the message.

Luke:
Is that a dig at my uniform or a kink I wasn’t prepared for?

Julian:
Yes.

A beat. Then another message.

Julian:
I meant what I said earlier. You really do look good in it.

Luke:
Thanks. You make me forget I’m wearing it.

A moment passes. Julian lets that one settle in. He presses his face into his pillow to hide a smile before replying.

Julian:
So what made you pull me back in? You looked like you were

trying to calculate gravity.

Luke:
I wasn't thinking. Not really. I just didn't want it to be over.

Julian (after a pause):
It didn't feel like an ending.

Luke:
It didn't.

A long pause now. Then:

Julian:
Are you always this quiet when something matters?

Luke:
I think I'm scared of saying the wrong thing.

Julian:
Then let me help. There's no "wrong" with me. Only honest.

Luke:
That's the scariest part.

Julian:
Then you're doing it right.

Julian snaps a photo—a soft one: his hand resting on a sketchbook with a half-drawn version of Luke's eyes. He doesn't say anything, just sends it.

Luke stares at it for a long time.

He types:

Luke:
I don't know what this is.

Julian replies:

Julian:
That's the best part. Neither do I.

Day 1:
Julian:
Do you always stare at people like they're puzzles?
Luke:
Only when they feel like home and mystery at the same time.

Day 2:
Luke:
What kind of music do you play when you want to disappear?
Julian:
Something with too much emotion and not enough lyrics.
Luke:
That sounds like you.
Julian:
Careful, you're starting to sound poetic.

Day 3:
Julian sends a photo of a sunrise from the shop roof.
Luke:
That where you go when the world gets too loud?
Julian:
Sometimes. You?
Luke:
My car. Engine off. Radio on. No one expecting anything from me.

Day 4:
Julian:
You ever think you were meant to be someone completely different?
Luke:
All the time.
Julian:
Who?
Luke:
Still figuring that out.
Julian:
I like this version. The one who asks instead of acts.

Day 5:
Luke (late at night):
Can't sleep.
Julian:
Want company or quiet?
Luke:

Just wanted to know you're still awake.
Julian:
Always. For you.

Day 6:
*Julian sends a sketch of two figures sitting on a bench. Their shoulders touching, their heads tilted slightly inward. No faces. Just shape and space.
Luke:
That us?
Julian:
Could be. If you want.

Day 7 — Early Evening:
Luke stares at the last message for a long time.

Then finally types:

Luke:
Can we meet? Not by accident this time. Not in uniform. Just… us.

Three dots appear.
Then stop.
Then appear again.

Julian:
Yeah. I'd like that.

—

Luke sits in his parked car, phone glowing in the dark. His message to Julian—"Can we meet?"*—still lingers above Julian's reply:
Yeah. I'd like that.

He stares at the blinking cursor in the message bar, hesitating.

He doesn't want to go to a diner. Or a bar. Or a park.
Not because of Julian.
Because of everyone else.

The uniforms. The watchful eyes. The invisible walls he's spent years learning to live behind.

He types.

Luke:
Not sure I'm ready for public. Can we… meet somewhere quiet? Just us.

A moment passes. Then:

Julian:
Yeah. You pick the place.

Luke:
There's a spot by the old train yard. No one goes there after sunset. It's quiet. Safe.

Julian (typing… then paused):
Safe for who?

Luke stares at that for a beat. It hits something raw.

He replies:

Luke:
For me, I guess.

Julian:
Then I'll bring the quiet. You bring yourself.

———

It's just past dusk. The sun's gone but left its ghost in the sky. There's gravel underfoot, rusted tracks curling off into the dark, and a stretch of tall grass waving in the breeze.

Luke leans against his car. No uniform. Just jeans, a hoodie, and nerves.

He hears footsteps. Turns.

Julian's walking toward him, hands in his jacket pockets. His hair's a little messy. He looks like calm incarnate.

They meet under a broken streetlamp. The silence is full but not heavy.

Julian (smiling):
“You always take people to abandoned train yards on your first date?”

Luke (softly):
“I didn’t think it would feel like a date.”

Julian:
“Does it now?”

Luke doesn’t answer. He doesn’t have to.

They sit on the edge of an old loading dock. Shoulders close but not touching. For now.

Luke:
“I don’t really know how to do this.”

Julian:
“You don’t have to do anything. Just be here.”

Luke nods. Looks up at the stars beginning to poke through the dusk.

Luke:
“I was scared you’d say no.”

Julian (turning toward him):
“I was scared you wouldn’t ask.”

—

They sit on the edge of the old loading dock, the night stretched around them like a blanket. There’s just enough moonlight to catch the shape of Julian’s jaw, the curve of Luke’s hands resting on his knees.

They haven’t touched yet, not really. But the closeness is loud.

Julian turns slightly, his leg brushing Luke’s. Their eyes meet.

There's no dramatic music, no sudden wind—just the stillness of two people finally leaning into what's already there.

Luke leans in first, slowly, like he's afraid the moment might vanish if he breathes wrong.
Julian meets him halfway, lips soft and sure.
The kiss is unpracticed, gentle. A question, not a claim.

It deepens for a breath—then another—and Luke's hand finds Julian's knee, just for balance, but also maybe for grounding.

When they part, Luke's breath catches in his throat. His forehead rests gently against Julian's.

Luke (whispers):
"I don't know how I've gone this long without… this."

Julian (soft smile):
"You have. But now you don't have to."

A quiet moment passes. Luke leans back slightly, eyes still on Julian's.

Julian (curious, open):
"Can I ask you something?"

Luke:
"Yeah."

Julian:
"What was it like? Growing up… the way you did?"

Luke's mouth opens. Then closes. He looks down at his hands, then out into the dark.

Luke:
"Structured. Tight. We prayed before meals. Church on Sundays. Football in the fall. My mom smiled a lot when people were around. My dad didn't smile at all."

*Julian doesn't say anything. He just listens—really listens.

Luke (quietly):
"I knew how to say the right things. How to act. But I always felt

like… like I was standing outside my own life, watching someone else live it. And I couldn't tell if I was proud or just trapped."

He glances at Julian, then looks away again.

Luke:
"I didn't hate it. I just… never saw another way."

Julian:
"And now?"

Luke:
"Now… I'm starting to."

*Julian reaches over and gently places his hand on Luke's. No pressure. Just presence.

Julian:
"Good. Because I think you're someone worth knowing. Not the version they made you into. You."

Luke's throat tightens. He's not used to being seen—especially not like this.

He doesn't kiss Julian again. But he holds his hand.

And in that moment, it's enough.

—

Luke unlocks the door to his apartment, flicking on the hallway light with a quiet click. The space is neat but unremarkable—everything in its place, but nothing that feels like him. Just enough to pass for someone who's got it all together.

He drops his keys in the bowl by the door, shrugs off his hoodie, and kicks off his boots. The silence settles in around him like an old coat. He pulls out his phone and sees a missed call from his mom.

He listens to the voicemail on speaker while pouring water into a glass.

Mom (cheerfully):
“Hey baby, just reminding you about church tomorrow! Your dad’s reading the scripture and we’re sitting in the second row. Don’t be late.”

He sighs. Sets the phone down.

His mind drifts back to the train yard. The kiss. Julian’s breath against his. The honesty of it all.

Without overthinking, he picks up the phone again and texts:

Luke:
Hey. This is probably a bad idea. But… want to come to church with me tomorrow?

Delivered.

The dots appear. Vanish. Appear again.

Julian:
Church?

Luke:
Yeah. I know. Weird. You don’t have to. But I’d like you there.

Julian:
You sure about that?

Luke:
No. But I’m sure I want to see you again.
And this part of me… it’s real. Even if I’m still figuring out what it means.

A long pause. Then:

Julian:
Alright. But if someone tries to lay hands on me, I’m out.

Luke (smiling):
No promises. I’ll pick you up at 9.

—-

Sunday morning light pours into Julian's small bedroom, casting stripes of gold across the floor. His alarm buzzes, but he's already awake—sitting on the edge of his bed, shirtless, staring at the neatly folded stack of clothes he laid out the night before.

A simple button-up. Clean jeans. His nicest shoes—not flashy, but unscuffed.

He pulls the shirt on, tugs at the collar, frowns. It fits fine. It's the setting that doesn't.

*In the mirror, he studies himself. He looks like someone who's trying. Not to impress. Not to fake it. Just to show up.

Still, he can't shake the feeling that this world might not be ready for him.

Julian (to himself, under breath):
"Let's see how weird this gets."

———

He heads out, locking the door behind him. His parents are still asleep. He didn't tell them where he was going. Not because he's hiding it. But because he's not sure how to name it yet.

He walks to the curb, eyes scanning the street. The air smells like fresh grass and laundry vents. It's quiet.

He sees the cruiser-turned-church-shuttle pull up slowly.

Luke's not in uniform.
But he looks just as good.
Better, somehow—softer in the eyes, sharper in the jaw. Tension and tenderness in one body.

Julian (smirking as he gets in):
"Look at you. All Sunday school grown up."

Luke (half-laughing):

“Don’t get used to it.”

———

As they drive, Julian looks out the window. Neighborhoods shift. Lawns get wider. The buildings a little cleaner. The cars parked along the streets a little newer.

He starts to notice it. The stares at red lights. The side glances. He doesn’t match the backdrop.

He leans back in his seat, quiet for a minute.

Julian (softly):
“Just so you know… I’m not here for God today.”

Luke glances at him, concerned, unsure.

Julian:
“I’m here for you.”

A beat. Luke nods. Grips the wheel tighter. He doesn’t say anything, but he reaches across the console—just for a second—and touches Julian’s knee. A quick, grounding squeeze.

Luke:
“I know.”

Julian exhales slowly and focuses on that hand.
That touch.
That’s his anchor.

The car slows as they near the church. A modest but well-kept building, white trim with a tall steeple, families already filtering in wearing pastel button-downs, floral dresses, the occasional suit. The parking lot is nearly full.

Inside the car, the air hums quietly with tension. Not fear—but something like pre-performance nerves. Luke keeps his eyes forward, both hands on the wheel.

Julian is watching him from the passenger seat, trying to read his energy.

Julian (soft):
“You okay?”

Luke (quiet):
“Yeah. Just thinking.”

A long beat. Then, without looking, Luke reaches across the center console—his fingers brushing the inside of Julian’s thigh. Just a moment. Enough to say I’m still here. Enough for Julian to breathe easier.

Julian (smiling):
“You know, if you want to hold my hand in front of a bunch of Baptists, I wouldn’t stop you.”

Luke (half-laughs, eyes still forward):
“Let’s… take this one step at a time.”

———

They pull into the gravel lot. Luke parks, cuts the engine. And just like that, it happens:

The softness in his shoulders disappears.
His jaw tightens.
His posture resets.

The hand that touched Julian’s leg now grips the door handle like a lifeline.

He steps out, puts on a tight-lipped smile, nods politely to an older man walking by. Julian follows, a beat behind, watching the change like someone watching a drawbridge raise itself.

By the time they walk up the steps, Luke has moved a full step ahead. His voice when he greets the usher is pleasant, even warm—but it’s the same voice he used in the cruiser when pretending everything was fine.

Julian walks in behind him. The sanctuary is bright, filled with sunlight and polished wood pews. People smile as they walk past.

Most of them don't look like him. Their clothes are pressed. Their eyes linger just a little too long.

Julian doesn't flinch, but the shift lands hard.

And when he looks to Luke—his anchor—he finds him already shaking hands with a deacon. Laughing lightly. Introducing Julian with a vague, safe word:

Luke:
"This is my friend, Julian."

Friend.

Julian nods politely, forces a smile, and takes the offered hand. He doesn't say anything. But he feels it.

That anchor?

It's gone cold.
And he's never felt more visible… or more alone.

Julian sits beside Luke, who's stiff but composed, palms on his knees, eyes forward. The pews creak under soft movements as families settle in. A quiet instrumental plays—something reverent, polished. Controlled.

Julian watches everything.

The lighting is warm.
The stage elevated.
Three screens hang overhead, glowing with sleek typography and pre-designed slides.

The pastor steps up, not from the back, but from a side hallway—his mic already live, his smile tight and confident. His suit tailored. His walk practiced. He isn't walking to the congregation—he's facing them.

Julian (internally):
Feels like a quarterly presentation.

The worship team sings. The music swells, but the lyrics repeat like a chorus looped too many times. People sing along. Hands raised, but only a few. It doesn't feel like surrender. It feels like a performance wrapped in sincerity. Or maybe the other way around.

Julian doesn't judge it—not harshly. But he notices.

The congregation doesn't respond much. They absorb. They receive.
No one interrupts.
No one reflects aloud.
Everything moves forward like a train on a track.

Then comes the sermon.

The pastor moves between slides. He cracks a few jokes. He emphasizes leadership, spiritual discipline, divine order. There are nods in the crowd. Laughter in all the right places. It's polished. Clean.

Julian (internally):
He's good. Too good.

Julian's eyes drift up to the projection screens, then down to the offering envelopes being passed down the pews.

White envelopes. Gold lettering. QR codes.
"Join the mission. Partner with the vision."
Optional—but not really.

Luke slides one down to Julian. Not as a push. Just because it's what you do.

Julian holds it in his lap. Doesn't fill it out. Just turns it over once. Then again.

Julian (internally):
So this is the moment. The trade-off. You hear the message. You give your due.
You pay to stay in the club.

He looks over at Luke. Luke's eyes are locked forward, jaw tight. Still.

Julian sighs softly, then turns back to the stage. His mind drifts—

not in boredom, but in observation.

Julian (internally):
I don't think this was meant to feel like a company.
But it does.

Still, he stays. Because Luke is here. And for Julian, the staying means something.

The church lobby is bright and full of life—voices rising in polite chatter, perfume mingling with coffee, and kids weaving between legs.

Luke walks slightly ahead of Julian as they exit the sanctuary. His jaw is tight again. Julian trails behind him, hands in his pockets, scanning the crowd.

Then comes the voice:

Mom:
"Luke! There you are!"

She approaches with a warm, painted-on smile, holding her Bible like a clutch. Sarah, Luke's older sister, is at her side in pearls and heels. Colton is slouched just behind them in a collared shirt he clearly hates.

Mom:
"I looked for you during the sermon—we were in the second row. I thought you'd missed it!"

Luke (smiling tightly):
"No, I was here. Just in the back."

He gently positions Julian beside him.

Luke:
"This is Julian. A… friend."

The word lands with a muted thud.

Julian offers a polite smile and a handshake. Luke's mom shakes it, warm but surprised. She studies him, taking in his appearance like she's looking for context. Julian notices—he's been seen like this before.

Sarah:
"Oh, you brought a friend today."

Colton (grinning, blurting out):
"Wait—weren't you the guy with the big guy freaking out by the gas station? That was wild—"

Luke (quickly):
"Colton."

A beat. Julian just raises an eyebrow, amused but unreadable.

Mom (still smiling, eyebrows raised):
"Oh? Where'd you two meet?"

Luke (too quickly):
"Mechanic shop. He worked on my cruiser. Figured I'd, you know… invite him. Maybe plant a seed."

The language comes out polished. Too polished.

Luke (awkward chuckle):
"You never know who's ready for… transformation."

Julian tilts his head slightly, smile tight, but he doesn't call it out. Not directly.
Just a gentle glance toward Luke. A flicker of something hurt.

Julian:
"Well… I'm always open. Even if it's just for the coffee."

Everyone chuckles. Except Luke, who looks like he wants to be anywhere else.

Luke:
"We should head out. Long day ahead."

———

The moment the doors shut, Luke exhales sharply, hands gripping

the wheel even though he hasn't turned the key. His body relaxes like he's just peeled off a costume.

Luke (quiet):
"I'm sorry. For… all that."

Julian looks out the window for a second, then back at him.

Julian:
"You don't owe me an apology. It's just… you're not out."

Luke flinches. Not visibly. But Julian sees it.

Julian (gently):
"That's not judgment. Just an observation."

Luke (after a beat):
"I've lived two different lives for so long… sometimes I forget which one I'm in. Or which one I'm allowed to be in."

Julian:
"You don't need to explain. I get it."

A long pause. Not tense—just full.

Luke (softly):
"You want to come over? To my place?"

Julian (measured):
"Is this still part of the conversion process?"

Luke smirks.

Luke:
"Only if I'm the one being converted."

Julian's smile returns—genuine this time.

Julian:
"Then yeah. Let's go."

The door shuts behind them.
A quiet click.
A final boundary crossed.

Luke tosses his keys onto the counter, chest still tight from church, from his mother's voice, from his own voice twisting Julian into a safe shape in front of them.

He doesn't speak. He just stands there—silent, still, his back to Julian.

Julian (softly):
"You okay?"

Luke turns. His eyes are glassy. His jaw clenched. He walks toward Julian, slow, measured, like he's trying to hold something inside but it's already cracking.

Then he kisses him.

*Harder than before. Desperate. Messy. Not like the kiss on the loading dock. This one is need. Not gentleness. Release.

Julian stumbles back, lips parting not in surprise, but recognition. He knows this energy. He felt it with Brielle. That same heat. That same unspoken demand to be a mirror, to carry someone else's need like it's sacred. But this time…

He wants it too.

They fall into each other.
Buttons are undone.
Breath quickens.
No words. Just hands. Just mouths. Just skin.

It's not graceful. It's not tender. It's real. And wild. And hungry. Years of repression, shame, wonder, ache—spilled all at once.

———

They lie tangled in Luke's sheets.
Sweat cooling.
Bodies still.

*Julian is on his side, eyes open, looking at Luke.

Luke's turned slightly away, hand over his mouth, staring at the ceiling like it might collapse.*

The air is thick with something unspoken.

Julian (quietly):
"Want me to go?"

A long pause. Luke's hand drops from his mouth.

Luke (barely audible):
"I don't know."

Julian sits up slowly, starts gathering his clothes without drama. Not offended. Not hurt. Just aware.

Julian (soft):
"You're not broken. You just don't know how to hold this yet."

Luke doesn't respond. He doesn't stop him either.

Julian pulls on his shirt, slips his shoes on by the door. He taps a few times on his phone.

Julian:
"I'll call an Uber."

Luke finally turns to look at him. His eyes full. His lips part, like he might say stay—but he doesn't.

Julian (gently):
"You don't have to carry the shame. Not with me.
But if you're not ready to let it go…
I know how to walk myself out."

*A beat. Then Julian opens the door. He doesn't slam it. He closes it quietly, respectfully. As if to say:
This mattered.
Even if it hurt.

—

Julian hasn't heard from Luke. Not a text. Not a drive-by. Nothing.

The silence has shape now. It's not just absence—it's an answer. But not the one he wanted.

He scrolls once through their old messages, thumb hovering. Then locks his phone, tosses it onto the workbench, and exhales.

Julian (to himself):
"Cool. Ghosted by a man who wears a badge and emotional repression."

———

Manny is under a lifted truck, humming along to a Tejano beat playing from a dented Bluetooth speaker. Julian slides under next to him, wrench in hand, but his mind clearly elsewhere.

Manny (not looking):
"You look like someone stole your puppy. Or your man. Or both."

Julian (dry):
"No man. No puppy. Just existential dread and lower back pain."

Manny (grinning):
"Ah. Catholic guilt in a queer body. Spicy combo."

Julian laughs, despite himself. Then groans and sits up.

Julian:
"You ever want something so bad, you forget to ask if you're ready for it?"

Manny (still under the truck):
"I once bought a hot tub on Craigslist."

Julian (blinking):
"…That feels unrelated."

Manny (rolling out, pointing a greasy finger):
"Exactly. So does Luke. You want something real? Go build something that doesn't depend on a man texting you back."

Julian leans against the car, quiet for a beat. Then—

Julian:
“I’ve been thinking about school again.”

Manny:
“You mean actually using that scary beautiful brain for something besides sketching hot mechanics?”

Julian (smirking):
“Maybe. I was looking at art therapy programs.”

Manny (mock gasps):
“Julian the Mechanic… healing people’s trauma with a paintbrush and repressed gay longing?”

Julian (laughs):
“Shut up.”

But he’s smiling now. Not because Luke’s absence doesn’t hurt.
But because something else is calling him forward.

A future that feels dangerous.
Safe.
Alive.
Scary.

All at once.

But this time, his.

Julian hasn’t heard from Luke. Not a word. The silence isn’t accidental—it’s intentional. A retreat. A wall slammed shut with no warning.

But Julian doesn’t chase it. Not this time.
Not again.

Still, he feels it.
Not just the ache, but the afterglow of something he didn’t know he could feel—

dangerous, safe, alive, and terrifying.

———

Manny's under a lifted Dodge, boots sticking out, yelling instructions to himself in Spanish. Julian's across the bay, flipping through a course catalog on his phone while pretending to organize the socket wrenches.

Manny (calling out):
"Whatever you're doing, you're doing it like someone who just got left on read by destiny."

Julian (without looking up):
"Luke ghosted me."

Manny (rolling out from under the truck):
"Of course he did. Cops are trained to disappear after impact."

Julian (smirking):
"He didn't owe me anything. But it still sucks."

Manny:
"Feelings usually do. Unless they come in a taco."

Julian tosses a rag at him. Manny dodges, laughing.

Julian (after a pause):
"I've been looking into grad programs."

Manny pauses. Actually pauses.

Manny:
"Wait, for what?"

Julian:
"Behavioral psych. I want to work with inmates—tough cases. The ones people don't think are worth saving."

Manny leans back against the workbench, crossing his arms. He studies Julian—really looks at him.

Manny:
"You always did like fixing what most people throw away."

Julian (quiet):
“Maybe I see parts of myself in them. Or parts of who I could’ve been.”

Manny (nodding):
“That’s deep. I’m uncomfortable. Go back to being sad and mysterious.”

Julian (grinning):
“I’m serious, man. I want to help people who’ve been locked up by more than just bars.”

Manny:
“You’re already doing it.”

Julian meets his eyes. There’s a quiet understanding between them now—less about the one who left, and more about the one who stayed. The one who’s choosing to build.

Manny (raising a brow):
“So, future Dr. Julian… you gonna trade me in for a lab coat?”

Julian (laughs):
“No. But I might psychoanalyze the hell out of you during lunch breaks.”

———

*And just like that, the shift is real.
Luke’s silence still echoes. But Julian isn’t sitting in it.
He’s walking through it.

Toward something harder.
And maybe, someday, something better.

Julian’s world is different now.

Early mornings are filled with lectures on trauma response and human behavior. Afternoons are spent hunched over case studies, highlighting texts, and juggling research deadlines. Nights are for the shop—just a few shifts a week now, grease under his nails and

podcasts in his ears.

He's tired. But he feels awake in a way he hasn't before.

———

It's late afternoon. Julian's just finished replacing brake pads on an old Subaru when the street outside erupts in sirens. Flashing lights paint the garage wall red and blue.

He walks to the front, wiping his hands on his shirt just as a cruiser screeches to a stop.

The door swings open. And out steps—
Luke.

For a moment, the noise disappears.

They lock eyes. Both frozen in place.
Luke looks… older. Tighter. But something in his face breaks open when he sees Julian.

Julian steps forward slowly, lips parting, unsure what to say first. But then—

Another cruiser screams into the scene and slams to a halt behind Luke's.

Kyle barrels out, sunglasses already down, hand near his holster, voice loud before his feet even hit the pavement.

Kyle:
"Where's the guy? Black hoodie? Got a weapon?"

He doesn't see Julian yet.

Luke looks back over his shoulder, annoyed, but says nothing. Julian's watching the entire dynamic shift. He sees it immediately—the way Kyle takes up the oxygen in the space. The way Luke visibly shrinks into protocol, into safety.

Julian folds his arms, neutral.

Julian (flat):
“Handgun ended up being a redneck with a pink camo purse. Left it in a backpack. No threat.”

Kyle turns to the voice, squints at Julian like he’s trying to place him—and then smirks.

Kyle:
“Well look what we got here. You the mechanic or the campus philosopher?”

Julian (calm):
“Depends who’s asking.”

Kyle laughs, clearly amused. He slaps Luke’s shoulder a little too hard.

Kyle:
“Luke’s got fans everywhere, huh?”

Julian watches the shift happen again—Luke retreating behind the badge, behind the grin, behind the “this is just work” face.

It stings.

But not because Julian wants anything from Luke.
Because he remembers that look. And he knows how much it costs to keep wearing it.

The call is dismissed a few minutes later, officially harmless. Kyle’s already moved on, chatting with a neighbor, loud and animated. Luke lingers.

Julian wipes his hands again and turns to go.

Luke (quietly):
“Julian—wait.”

Julian pauses. Looks over his shoulder.

Julian:
“Hey, Luke.”

A beat.

Julian (soft):
“You look good.”

Luke (searching his face):
“So do you.”

Julian smiles—small but real—and disappears back into the garage.

And Luke is left standing there, watching the space Julian used to be in.

Heart racing.
Breath tight.

And for the first time in months,
he wishes he had said more.

It’s a Wednesday afternoon, and Julian has just finished a back-to-back lecture block. He’s outside the behavioral sciences building, backpack slung low, headphones around his neck, reviewing case notes on his tablet while sipping a vending machine coffee.

His phone buzzes—campus alert:

Suspicious person reported near the west parking deck. Possible weapon. Police en route.

Julian reads it, sighs. Probably nothing. Still, curiosity tugs at him.

He starts walking toward the deck—not because he wants to get involved, but because he knows that kind of language.
“Suspicious” is often code.
For “someone didn’t fit.”

———

By the time Julian gets there, a crowd of students is hovering at a safe distance, murmuring and watching.

Two cruisers pull up. One parks cleanly. The other comes in hot, tires squealing.

*From the first cruiser, Luke steps out.

He scans the area, composed, eyes sharp—but the second he spots Julian across the crowd, something flickers.

Recognition.
Longing.
Shock.*

Julian is just as stunned. They haven't seen each other in weeks. He thought Luke had disappeared into the silence for good.

But then—

Kyle explodes out of the second cruiser. Sunglasses down, mouth already open, hands stiff.

Kyle:
"Where's the guy? Hoodie, black backpack—who reported a weapon?"

Luke turns, annoyed.

Luke:
"Kyle—stand by. We don't have confirmation."

Kyle doesn't hear him—or chooses not to.

Kyle (louder):
"Sir, step away from the bag! Hands where I can see 'em!"

It's a student—wide-eyed, nervous, standing beside a half-open backpack. Inside is… a pink camo handbag.

Julian (loud enough to cut through):
"It's a purse. There's no weapon."

Everyone turns. Luke exhales in quiet relief. Kyle looks irritated.

Kyle (to Julian):
"Who are you, campus security?"

Julian (deadpan):
“Grad student. Behavioral psych. Pretty sure that gives me enough training to tell a purse from a pistol.”

Kyle eyes him with a lopsided grin, then glances at Luke.

Kyle:
“This your study buddy?”

Luke doesn’t respond. His silence is heavy.

Julian meets Luke’s eyes—searching, a flicker of hope there—but the wall is already creeping up in Luke’s posture. That practiced distance. That safety.

It hurts more than he thought it would.

The situation diffuses quickly. Campus security arrives. The crowd starts to break up. Kyle makes a loud joke and heads back to the cruiser like he’s already forgotten.

Julian turns to leave.

Luke (quietly):
“Julian—wait.”

Julian pauses. Turns halfway.

Julian:
“Hey, Luke.”

A beat. A thousand things unsaid.

Julian (gently):
“You look good.”

Luke (soft):
“So do you.”

A silence between them.

Julian:
“I’ve got class in ten. Take care, alright?”

He walks away. And this time, Luke watches him go until the crowd swallows him up.

And for the first time since that night,
Luke realizes he didn't just lose a moment.

He might have lost a way out.

Luke sits alone in his apartment that night, the room dim, his uniform shirt draped over the back of a chair, untouched takeout growing cold on the counter.

The encounter at the campus plays over and over in his mind—Julian's voice cutting through the noise, calm and present. The way he stood his ground. The way Luke felt everything again, not like a memory, but like a match struck fresh.

He had thought the thing they shared in his apartment that night was a release—something that would burn out once it had space to breathe.

But it wasn't.
It opened something.
Something still burning.

And every time he sees Julian, it fans the flame.

———

He stares at his phone. Thumb hovering over Julian's name in his contacts.

He thinks of Kyle. That once-consuming fixation. That need to be seen. To be accepted. To be initiated into something masculine and impenetrable. But it was all one-way. A locked door he kept banging on until he realized no one was ever going to open it.

Now Kyle just feels like a loud, messy older brother figure he's

stuck babysitting.
Julian is… different.

Because Julian looked back.

Because Julian felt it too.

Luke sighs. Guilt pings through him—not just for ghosting, but for feeling emotionally unstable. For not being able to hold onto something good without unraveling.

Still, he types:

Luke:
Hey. I know it's been a while. I don't even know if I have the right to text you. But seeing you today… it reminded me that what happened between us didn't end anything. It started something I still don't understand.

He stares at it. Deletes it. Tries again.

Luke (new message):
Hi. I saw you today and… yeah. I've been a coward. And I've missed you. A lot. That's all I've got right now.

He hits send.

His heart's in his throat.

———

A few minutes later…
The screen lights up.

Julian:
Hey, Luke.

A pause.

Julian (follow-up):
You don't have to know what to say. I'm still here.

Another buzz.

Julian:
Want to try again? No expectations. Just honesty.

*Luke closes his eyes. Exhales. That familiar warmth spreads through his chest—the kind that only shows up when someone says: you don't have to be perfect to be welcome.

He types, slower this time.

Luke:
Yeah. I'd like that. I want to try again.
Even if I don't know how to do this yet.

Julian:
Then we'll figure it out. One sentence at a time.

The apartment is quiet when Julian steps inside. Luke opens the door like someone afraid it might close again. There's no pretense this time—no half-excuses, no playing it cool. Just eyes meeting, breaths held.

They kiss in the hallway.
Slowly, gently.
Like they're afraid to scare it off.

Clothes come off. Skin against skin. This time it's not primal. It's quiet. Deliberate.
A rhythm of trust, not urgency.

When it's over, they don't separate.

Julian lies against Luke's chest, fingertips tracing slow lines over his shoulder. Luke's arms stay wrapped around him, anchoring him there.

And for the first time, Luke doesn't pull away.

He doesn't reach for his clothes.
He doesn't check the time.
He doesn't try to make it transactional.

He just lies there. Breathing.
Then:

Luke (quietly):
“I thought if I just… did it—if we had sex—it would get it out of me.”

Julian listens. Doesn’t speak. Just stays close.

Luke:
“But it didn’t. It wasn’t something I could… shake off. You weren’t something I could shake off.”

A beat of silence.

Luke (voice shaking):
“I’ve spent my whole life trying to be what people expect. Quiet. Strong. God-fearing. Straight.”

He swallows. Julian can feel the tension in his chest.

Luke:
“I thought if I let myself feel something different, the whole thing would come crashing down. And maybe it did. But… I’m still here.”

Julian (soft):
“You are.”

Luke (turning slightly, finally looking him in the eye):
“When you left that night… it wasn’t you I was ashamed of. It was me. For being scared. For not knowing how to carry something beautiful without dropping it.”

Julian lifts his hand and gently rests it on Luke’s cheek.

Julian:
“You don’t have to carry it alone. Not with me.”

A long silence. Not uncomfortable—just full.

Luke presses his forehead to Julian’s.

Luke:
“This right here? This feels more intimate than sex.”

Julian (whispering):
“That’s because it is.”

———

They fall asleep in each other’s arms. No confusion. No shame. Just the quiet beginning of something real.

They lie in silence, skin cooling beneath the soft pull of the sheets. Luke’s arm is still around Julian, their legs tangled naturally now—less like a question, more like a choice.

Luke takes a breath.
Then another.
Then speaks.

Luke (quietly):
“I need you to know… I’m not ready to be out. Not to my family. Not at work. Not… yet.”

Julian doesn’t shift. Doesn’t pull away. Just listens.

Luke (continuing):
“But I want to explore this. With you. Not like a secret. Just… privately. Genuinely.”

Julian turns slightly, placing a hand over Luke’s heart.

Julian (softly):
“Then that’s where we start.”

———

The weeks that follow settle into a quiet ritual. Julian comes over after class, sometimes with textbooks, sometimes with dinner. They spread out on Luke’s couch or floor, textbooks open, laptops humming. Julian studies—case notes, behavior models, psychological theories.

Luke watches him sometimes, silently stunned by how easy this part is. How his apartment no longer feels sterile but lived-in. Held.

Warm.

Eventually, the books close. The kisses begin. The night folds inward.

They don't always talk after.
Sometimes they just lie there, breathing in the dark.
But each time, Luke holds him a little longer.

———

The lights were low in Luke's apartment. The TV hummed quietly in the background, muted on some news channel neither of them was really watching.

Luke tossed a handful of trail mix into his mouth and leaned back on the couch, one leg draped over the armrest.

Julian sat cross-legged beside him, grading papers.

Luke rubbed his forehead. "Long day. Had a call downtown near the shelters again."

Julian glanced up. "Another overdose?"

"Nah. Guy was yelling in traffic, shirtless, swinging a broom at passing cars. Holmes was with me — and of course, he starts up again with his usual."

Julian raised an eyebrow. "What usual?"

"That homelessness is a choice," Luke muttered. "Says if you can't keep a job or roof, it's on you. That there's work out there if people want it."

Julian closed his folder slowly. "And you agree with that?"

Luke shrugged. "I mean… I don't know. I get what he means. There's programs. Temp jobs. Soup kitchens."

Julian tilted his head. "You think people choose to live like that?"

Luke hesitated. "I mean… some, maybe. I don't know. Holmes says most of 'em are just lazy."

Julian stared at him.

Luke shifted. “What?”

Julian’s voice stayed soft, but his eyes held something firmer. “You really think laziness explains sleeping on concrete? Choosing to piss in alleyways? To have people walk past you like you don’t exist?”

Luke rubbed his jaw, suddenly less certain.

Julian leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “In one of my psych classes, we talked about this. Mental illness is a major factor in homelessness — like, one of the top ones. And I’m not talking about just diagnosis. I mean trauma. Disassociation. Untreated grief. The kind that makes you feel like no place is safe — not even a bed.”

Luke said nothing.

Julian continued, quieter now. “That’s why giving a sandwich or five bucks isn’t enough. The wound’s not in their stomach or wallet. It’s in their mind.”

He paused.

“And you can’t hand someone peace if they’ve already given up on themselves. Or if they think we gave up on them first.”

Luke looked over at him — and for the first time, really saw the weight behind Julian’s words.

Julian shook his head, more to himself than to Luke. “We call it a choice so we don’t have to look at the system. Or the soul.”

Silence sat between them — thick, but not hostile.

Julian leaned back into the couch, thoughtful, the edges of his voice softening with reflection.

“You know what I think really gets to people about homelessness?” he said.

Luke looked over, brow raised.

Julian continued. “It reminds us that we can’t fix everything. And that terrifies us.”

He let the silence hang a moment, then added:

“Especially people like us — we’re always trying to solve something. Control it. Manage it. But when you pull up to a stoplight and someone’s standing there with a sign, and you’ve got nothing to give — or you don’t want to — you feel that panic rise.”

Luke shifted. “Because if you look… you have to do something.”

Julian nodded. “Exactly. We think acknowledgment means obligation. That if we see someone, really see them, we’re now responsible for the entire story. So instead, we look away. Pretend they’re not there.”

He glanced at Luke now, not accusing — just real.

“We ignore their humanity to protect our illusion of control.”

Luke didn’t respond right away. He was listening in that way Julian had learned to read — not just with his ears, but with his whole body.

Julian’s voice dropped even lower, almost conspiratorial.

“But what if the goal isn’t to fix it?”

Luke blinked. “Then what is it?”

“To explore it,” Julian said, with that soft fire behind his words. “To step into it. Not with answers. With curiosity. With presence.”

He smiled faintly. “To walk up to that hurt and say, ‘I don’t know what to do with you, but I’m not going to pretend you don’t exist.’”

Luke tilted his head, lips curling into a half-smirk.

“Curiosity and exploration,” he said. “Your two favorite words.”

Julian laughed, sheepish but unashamed. “Guilty.”

Luke nudged his knee against Julian's. "You're like a therapist mixed with a poet who accidentally wandered into my life and made me feel all the things I've spent thirty years avoiding."

Julian gave him a mock-offended look. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Luke stared at him for a beat — that rare, disarmed kind of stare that only came out in moments like this.

"It's not," he said. "It's really not."

Julian had gone quiet again, his head tilted toward the ceiling like he was still turning the conversation over in his mind — holding it, tending to it.

Luke watched him.

Not the way he usually did — not eyes tracing lips or collarbones or the way Julian's fingers danced when he talked.

This was something deeper.

Something slower.

It was the way Julian made room for the world.
The way he could name something ugly — something everyone tried not to see — and somehow make it worthy of attention.

The way his compassion wasn't loud.
It was patient.
Unyielding.
Deliberate.

It was the quiet gravity he carried — like he belonged to the moment more than anyone else in the room.

Luke felt it then, with a clarity that startled him.

This was the moment he started to fall.

Not because of how Julian looked in the soft lamp light.
Not because of how his voice dropped when he got thoughtful.
But because Julian saw everything — and still stayed soft.

Luke shifted closer without thinking, shoulder brushing Julian's, their knees already touching.

Julian looked over at him and raised a brow, smiling. "What?"

Luke didn't answer right away.

He just looked at him — open, almost overwhelmed.

"Nothing," he said finally, voice low. "Just… you surprise me."

Julian grinned. "Good surprise or bad surprise?"

Luke shook his head slowly.

"The kind that makes you feel like maybe the world's not as cold as you thought it was."

Julian's smile faltered — just slightly — not because he was confused, but because he understood what that meant.

He didn't say anything else.

He just let his shoulder rest against Luke's a little more fully.

And in the silence between them, something real began to grow — quiet, slow, undeniable.

—

Luke's at his parents' house. The table is set like it always is—roast chicken, green beans, sweet tea sweating in glass pitchers. Sarah is talking about her youngest making the honor roll. Colton makes a dry comment about "capitalist grading metrics." Their mom rolls her eyes affectionately.

Luke's more relaxed than usual. Laughing easier. Shoulders looser. There's a glow to him his mother picks up on.

Mom (lightly):
"You've been smiling more lately."

Luke looks up, surprised. Then down at his plate, sheepish.

Mom:
“I like seeing you happy.”

A beat. Then, softly:

Mom:
“How’s your friend? Julian?”

Luke tenses slightly, but when he meets her eyes, they’re soft. Curious. Gentle—but not prying. Like she knows, or maybe doesn’t want to know, but is making space just in case.

Luke (quiet):
“He’s… good. He’s smart. Funny. He makes me think.”

Mom (smiling):
“Well, we need more of that in the world.”

She pats his hand and goes back to pouring sweet tea. Conversation shifts.

———

The sun is setting. Luke stands outside with his father, who’s lighting a cigar like he always does when the air cools and he thinks it’s time to share wisdom.

Dad:
“You know, I meant what I said before. It’s time to start thinking about settling down.
Find a good woman. Build a home. Stability matters in your line of work.”

Luke says nothing. Just watches the smoke curl upward.

Dad (continuing):
“You need someone who understands the role. Marriage is about commitment. Sacrifice. You can’t afford to follow feelings. You choose someone. You build something.”

A long pause.

Luke (quietly):
“Is that what you did?”

Dad (startled):
“What?”

Luke:
“Did you marry mom because it made sense? Was it transactional?”

The silence is different now. More brittle.

Luke (more sure now):
“Because I’m starting to think love isn’t just something you do.
It’s something you are. And I don’t think I can build a life where I’m only allowed to do it halfway.”

His dad takes a slow drag of the cigar, not meeting his eyes.

Dad (muted):
“You’ve always been too soft, Luke.”

Luke (sharply):
“No. I’ve always been human.”

A long pause. Luke steps back toward the door.

Luke:
“I’m not asking for your approval. Just letting you know:
I’m not going to marry a woman because it makes you feel like I turned out okay.”

———

Inside, his mom is clearing plates. She glances at him, sensing something in the air. She doesn’t ask. She just smiles softly as he grabs his keys.

Mom (gently):
“Tell Julian I said hello.”

Fluorescent lights hum above rows of dented lockers. Sweat, old deodorant, and Axe body spray hang thick in the air. A few guys are toweling off, some half-dressed, joking loudly.

Luke sits on the bench, tying his boots. Kyle stomps in, loud as ever, slapping a locker door closed for effect.

Kyle:
“Tell me why every damn call lately is someone crying over nothing. Feels like we’re policing people’s feelings now.”

The guys laugh—half reflex, half discomfort.

Luke (calmly):
“Maybe because feelings are the only thing left that get noticed.”

Kyle grins, towel over his shoulder, like he’s waiting to pounce.

Kyle:
“Oh here we go. Feelings. I swear, every other guy’s turning into a therapist now.”

Luke doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t smile.

Luke:
“Have you ever noticed the reason guys love sports so much? It’s one of the only places society lets men scream, cry, hug each other. Be vulnerable.”

A beat. That hush creeps in. Someone zipping up their vest slows down to listen.

Kyle (snorts):
“Yeah. ‘Cause it’s sports. Not therapy hour.”

Luke:
“Exactly. We wrap it in uniforms, in rules, in rivalry—just to give men permission to feel. You ever cried during a game, Kyle?”

Kyle (smirking):
“Hell no.”

A pause. One of the younger guys across the room mutters:

Rookie:
“I have.”

Laughter. But nervous. Kyle chuckles loudly to override it.

Kyle:
“Right. Well, not all of us are built like that.”

Luke:
“Built like what?”

Kyle blinks. The room stiffens, not from tension—but from attention.

Kyle (shrugging):
“Like… you know. Sensitive.”

Luke:
“You mean human?”

A few guys snicker. Someone whistles low. Kyle turns toward the lockers, trying to laugh it off.

Kyle (defensive):
“Look, some of us are just trying to do the job and not turn into Oprah.”

Luke (pressing, voice quiet but cutting):
“No one’s asking you to turn into Oprah. But maybe if more men were taught it’s okay to feel something, fewer of them would end up choking it into violence.”

A silence follows that lands heavy—but not hostile. Reflective. A few heads nod subtly. Someone murmurs, “That’s real.”

Kyle tries to pivot.

Kyle:
“Look, I’m just saying—this new soft cop culture is why nobody respects us anymore. Everyone’s walking on eggshells.”

Luke (level):

“No, they’re walking on eggshells because guys like you never learned how to walk around people without stepping on them.”

*A few more *“Damn…”s from the lockers. Kyle notices the shift now—his usual crowd isn’t laughing. His armor of arrogance has cracks.

He grabs his bag, muttering under his breath.

Kyle:
“Y’all keep talking like this, next thing you know someone’s gonna start hugging in here.”

Luke meets his eyes, no smile this time.

Luke:
“I’d rather hug than hide.”

———

Kyle leaves. The door slams behind him, but not hard enough to drown the new quiet in the room—thoughtful, charged, alive.

One of the older officers leans in toward Luke.

Officer:
“About time someone said it.”

*Luke exhales, not with pride, but with something deeper: release.

He didn’t have to yell to be heard.
He just had to tell the truth.

It’s late evening. Luke’s apartment is softly lit—music playing low, a half-eaten takeout container on the coffee table. Julian is on the couch, legs stretched out, one of Luke’s hoodies draped over him. They’re kissing—slow, easy. Familiar now.

Luke pulls back for a breath, forehead resting against Julian’s, when —

Knock-knock-knock.

Sharp. Rushed.

Luke tenses.

Luke:
“Shit. It’s probably just—”

He doesn’t finish the thought. They both freeze as the front door creaks open. Luke had forgotten to lock it.

Kyle (offscreen):
“Yo, Luke? You good? I heard—”

He steps into the room. Sees them.
Mouths still close.
Hands still holding.

Kyle stops dead.

Kyle:
“…What the fuck.”

Julian immediately pulls back, instinctively reaching for space, but Luke just stares—paralyzed.

Kyle (shaking his head, almost laughing):
“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

His voice isn’t loud. It’s not violent.
It’s dripping with something worse:
disgust masquerading as disappointment.

Kyle (mocking):
“So this is what all that locker room therapy crap was about?
You getting soft ‘cause you’re busy playing house?”

Luke stands. Slowly.
Still trying to catch up.

Luke:
“Kyle—get out.”

Kyle:
“No. No, I will not get out until you realize how far off the damn rails you’ve gone. You think this is just about you?”

Julian stands now, too. Calm. Still.
But present.

Julian (even):
“You should leave. Before this becomes something worse.”

Kyle stares at him. A long, hard beat. Then turns to Luke.

Kyle:
“You don’t get to drag the rest of us down with you. You want to wreck your life? Fine. But don’t expect everyone to keep pretending you’re the same guy.”

He slams the door behind him.

———

The next morning. Luke’s phone buzzes.

Missed Call: Mom
Voicemail: 1 New

He hesitates. Then presses play.

Mom’s Voice (tentative, distant):
“Hi baby. Your father… he wants to talk. Tonight if possible. Just… give us a call, okay?”

The world tilts slightly. Luke’s breath catches.
His hands shake—not from fear. From heartbreak.

He sits on the edge of his bed. Julian’s not there—already gone for class.

And the silence in the room is a reminder:
You can only live in two worlds for so long
before one of them breaks.

—

*The house smells like roast chicken and rosemary. The table is set with cloth napkins, candles lit. His mother floats through the room with her usual smile—gracious, pleasant, just the right amount of warmth to keep things calm.

Luke sits across from his parents, Colton absent tonight, Sarah away with her kids. For a moment, it's almost normal. His mom compliments how "rested" he looks. She asks if he's found a new barber. Luke smiles politely, eating slowly, trying not to read into anything.

There's a lull.

Mom (gently):
"Your father wanted to talk to you after dinner. Just in the study. Nothing serious."

Luke nods, but something twists in his gut.

———

"

It's the same room Luke used to get sent to when he mouthed off in church clothes. Warm leather, oak bookshelves, a framed picture of their family taken years ago—one where Luke's smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

His father closes the door. Sits behind the desk.

No small talk.

Dad (measured):
"Your mother and I got a phone call. About you. From someone we trust."

Luke freezes. But his face stays neutral.

Dad:
"He told us he walked in on you. With another man. Said you're… living in sin."

A long silence. Luke doesn't speak. His father leans forward, fingers folded like a pastor behind a pulpit.

Dad:
"Luke, I raised you in the Word. I raised you to be a man of God. This—this—is not the path."

He opens a drawer. Pulls out a notebook, flipping to a sermon transcript. Luke knows this tactic—chapter and verse as weapon.

Dad (reading):
'If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination…'"

Luke's jaw clenches.

Luke (quietly):
"Is this why you asked me here? To read a script at me?"

Dad:
"This isn't a script, Luke. This is the truth. This is what will save you. What will save your soul."

Luke stands. Not in defiance—just to breathe.

Luke:
"I'm not lost. I've never been more honest in my life."

His father's voice softens. Suddenly. Strangely.

Dad:
"You know… I used to think I had you figured out. The strong one. The disciplined one."

Luke pauses.

Dad (more vulnerable now):
"I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm trying to protect you. From a world that's gonna devour you. From a God that's already disappointed."

A crack. Luke feels it. Deep.

Dad (softly):
"Is this what you really want? To throw away everything we built

together? To be someone I can't even understand?"

*That last part isn't shouted. It's whispered. And somehow, it lands harder than the verse. Because for the first time, his father sounds hurt. Human. And afraid.

Luke looks at him—at the man who never cried, who never bent.

And he feels it—that ancient need. To be seen. To be approved. The crux of every compromise he's ever made.

And it almost breaks him.

Luke gets home late. The apartment is dark. His keys drop onto the counter like they weigh more than they should. He sits on the edge of his bed, phone lighting up in his hand.

Julian (text):
How'd it go? With your dad.

Luke stares at the screen. His thumb hovers, then taps.

Luke:
Fine.

A pause.

Julian:
Want me to come over?

Luke:
Not tonight. Just tired.
Need space.

A long pause. Then:

Julian:
Okay. I'm here when you're ready.

Luke reads it twice. Locks the phone.
And lies back in the dark, eyes wide open.

———

SCENE: “The Next Morning” – Station Parking Lot

Luke steps out of his car, black coffee in one hand, sunglasses shielding the wreckage beneath his eyes. He’s halfway to the locker room when he hears—

Kyle:
“Luke. Got a sec?”

Luke turns, shoulders stiffening, but Kyle’s body language is… different. Not puffed up. No swagger. Just hands in his jacket pockets, voice lower than usual.

Kyle:
“Look, I just wanted to say…
I shouldn’t have walked into your place like that. I messed up. That wasn’t right.”

Luke says nothing, but his eyes narrow. This isn’t the Kyle he knows.

Kyle (quietly):
“I know I give you shit. But I’m not trying to ruin your life. I just… I was surprised. That’s all.”

A pause. Kyle watches him.

Kyle (carefully):
“You gay?”

Luke freezes. Every nerve tightens.
His fingers curl slightly around the coffee cup.

Luke (flat):
“No.”

Kyle nods. Waits. Doesn’t push.

Kyle (after a moment):
“I mean, not my business. But if you were…
that’d be your call. You sure?”

Luke looks away. Into the sun. Into nowhere.

Luke:
“I said no.”

Another pause. Kyle shifts his weight, like he knows this is the last shot.

Kyle (genuinely):
“Alright. Just wanted to give you a chance. Some people don’t get one.”

Luke turns, starts walking. The words echo behind him.

Kyle (calling out, not unkind):
“See you inside, brother.”

———

*Luke walks faster. His chest aches—not from fear. From something deeper.
He hears his own voice repeating like a broken recording:
“No.”
“No.”
“No.”

But something in him knows—
he didn’t say it to Kyle.

He said it to himself.

Luke unlocks his apartment door and steps inside, the smell of warm tortillas and spices wrapping around him like a ghost of comfort. He pauses. Julian’s in the kitchen, barefoot, reheating something on the stove.

Julian turns with a small smile, soft and familiar.

Julian:
“Brought you some food from my mom. Thought you could use a real meal.”

Luke doesn’t say anything at first. He closes the door behind him, sets his keys down, walks over, and sits at the counter.

Julian plates the food gently—rice, carne guisada, warm corn tortillas wrapped in foil—and places it in front of him.

Julian (gently):
“She even made you the spicy salsa this time. Said you looked like someone who could handle the heat.”

Luke chuckles. Barely. He starts eating. It’s good. He murmurs a quiet—

Luke:
“Thanks.”

But he’s distant.
Julian feels it immediately.

They sit in silence for a few moments, only the hum of the stove and quiet clinks of silverware between them.

Julian (finally):
“What is it?”

Luke swallows hard. Puts his fork down. Doesn’t look up.

Luke (flat, rehearsed):
“I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

Julian freezes. Like the words knocked the breath out of him.

Julian:
“…Do what?”

Luke finally looks at him.

Luke (quiet):

“Us. This. I can’t do it. I’ve tried.”

Julian takes a breath. Not disbelief—just trying to stay upright.

Julian:
“You are doing it. We’re doing it. Right now.”

Luke:
“It doesn’t feel right.”

Julian:
“Doesn’t feel right… or feels like something you were told you’re not allowed to want?”

Luke doesn’t answer.
And that silence is the answer.

Julian stands now, jaw trembling slightly, eyes wet but still blazing.

Julian:
“I know what this is.
You’re scared. And I get it. I’ve been scared too. But I’m here. I’ve stayed. Even when you couldn’t say it. Even when you ghosted me. And now, just when I start to feel you trust it—really trust it—you’re pulling away again.”

Luke closes his eyes, exhaling like the weight is pressing against his ribs.

Luke (barely audible):
“I can’t be who you need.”

Julian (stepping closer):
“I don’t need you to be anything but you. You’re the one who thinks love requires permission. Or perfection. I just want the man who looked me in the eye and held me like I was safe.”

A long silence.

Julian’s breath starts to shake.

Julian:
“I can still feel your touch on my skin.
I know what your laugh sounds like when it’s real.

And I know the way your body curls when you sleep, like you're still holding on to something.
So don't tell me this didn't mean something."

*Luke stands now too, but his shoulders are slumped. He's not standing up to Julian. He's just… folding.

Luke (hollow):
"It meant everything.
That's why I have to let it go."

*Julian stares at him. Something in him finally breaks—not from anger. From grief.

He takes a slow breath. His voice is a whisper now.

Julian:
"I could fight for you forever.
But not if you're the one building the wall."

A pause. Then:

Julian:
"I'm tired, Luke. I'm tired of proving I'm worth staying for."

He grabs his coat from the hook near the door. His hand hovers over the keys Luke gave him. He sets them down gently.

Then he opens the door. Stops once more.

Julian (quietly):
"I hope someday you stop running from the things that make you whole."

And then he leaves.
The door shuts behind him like the final page of a chapter neither of them wanted to end.

Julian walks home slowly.
The streetlights blur at the edges of his vision. His breath is shallow, like grief is sitting on his lungs.

His parents are out. The house is quiet when he enters. Shoes by the door. The familiar hum of the fridge. Everything feels normal—offensively so.

He closes the door and leans against it. Feels the tears trying to rise again.
But he doesn't cry.
Not yet.

Then—

Crash.

From the back room. A loud, sharp sound. Wood against wall.
Julian's body jolts.

He rushes toward it.

———

Efraín is in the hallway—eyes wide, body rocking forward and back, muttering fast and low. His hand is bleeding. He'd punched the wall. Again.

Julian sees it. Sees him. And something in his own pain—twists it.

Julian (frustrated):
"Efraín—stop! Please, not tonight—not tonight!"

Efraín doesn't respond. He lashes out again, arms swinging wild. Not at Julian—just at the air. At the chaos. But Julian, in his raw state, steps in too fast, too rough.

*He grabs Efraín's wrists to stop him—
but he squeezes.
Harder than he means to.

Hard enough to hurt.

Efraín (wails):
“Julian! JULIAN—hurts—”

*And suddenly—Julian’s there.
Not in the pain. Not in the fight.
In the realization.

He releases him immediately.
Efraín falls to the floor, curling up into his usual post-crisis rock, hands over his ears.

And Julian—

Julian breaks.

*He collapses to the floor, eyes wide, hands trembling as his breath shatters in his throat. The sobs come suddenly. Loud. Unfiltered.
He’s not just crying over what happened with Luke.
He’s crying because he lost himself.

Julian (barely choking it out):
“I’m sorry… I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…”

Efraín rocks beside him, still murmuring, tears slipping down his cheeks too. Not understanding, but feeling something. Sensing the rupture in his brother.

Julian presses his forehead to the floor, breath ragged.

This wasn’t who he was.

This wasn’t what he fought for.

But pain doesn’t always whisper—it consumes.

And in that moment, Julian realizes:
He can’t afford to let grief be the only voice in the room.

He reaches out, one trembling hand, and places it gently on Efraín’s back. The contact is soft this time. Restorative. Human.

Efraín leans into it. Still rocking. But slower now.

And Julian sobs—not just in shame.
But in remorse.
In release.
In return.

It's Saturday morning, and the sun is already high and unforgiving. Julian squints as he lifts a lopsided wooden bench out of the back of Manny's truck, the scent of gasoline and sawdust clinging to his clothes.

Manny hops down from the tailgate, wiping his hands on a faded rag tucked into his waistband.

Manny:
"Careful with that one—it's got a personality. And probably a few splinters of trauma."

Julian (grunting as he sets it down):
"Like most of your creations."

Manny grins, popping open a folding table with one foot.

Manny:
"Hey, people pay for trauma now. It's called rustic."

Julian smirks. It's the first time his face has lifted in days. The kind of laugh that doesn't chase away the ache but offers it a seat.

———

The flea market is alive with slow-moving families, food trucks humming, vinyl records crackling from someone's portable speaker. There's a dog in a baby stroller and a kid eating something unnaturally blue.

Manny's stall is full of crooked stools, uneven end tables, and one coat rack that looks like it was made from the skeleton of an angry tree.

Manny (proudly):
“I call this piece ‘Unstable Father Figure.’”

Julian laughs. This time, it sticks a little longer.

They work side by side—hammering signs into the grass, adjusting a wobbly shelf that definitely shouldn’t hold anything heavier than a paper napkin.

Manny (watching Julian quietly):
“You look a little less ghostly today.”

Julian:
“Trying.”

Manny:
“You don’t gotta fix it all at once. Just… show up. Breathe. Lift heavy things. Sell people garbage with charm.”

Julian looks around. People are buying. Smiling. A woman is bartering for a chair with three legs and a story.

Julian (quietly):
“Thanks for asking me to help. I needed… something real.”

Manny (grinning):
“That’s what friends are for. Emotional scaffolding and manual labor.”

———

They fall into rhythm. The sun climbs. The air thickens. And somewhere in the hammering, the laughter, and the imperfect furniture, Julian feels it:

Not healing.
But living.

And for now, that’s enough.

Julian is folding a blanket over the tailgate, sweat already forming under his shirt. Manny is standing over a wobbly coffee table,

trying to decide if it's ironic enough to be worth ten dollars more.

Manny:
"Think I should call this one 'Stable Boyfriend Energy'?"

Julian (smirking):
"You know damn well it leans to the left."

Manny:
"So does my heart."

They laugh. There's ease in Julian's body today. The grief is still there, but quieter now—woven into the folds of his breath instead of riding his skin.

A few early shoppers stroll past, sipping iced lemonades, toddlers climbing up on furniture like tiny kings. Music plays somewhere down the row—faint acoustic guitar. Life hums.

———

Julian walks a lap around the market. Partly to stretch his legs. Partly to clear his mind. He passes vendors with handmade soaps, knitted keychains, cracked books, and old vinyl records no one will play but everyone likes to flip through.

He thinks about texting Luke. Doesn't.

He stops near a booth selling hand-painted signs with Bible verses and snarky kitchen quotes. One says:
"Love bears all things."

He stares at it for a second.
Then keeps walking.

———

*A scuffle near the vendor tents. A sudden shout. A woman screaming something about a gun.

The crowd jolts. Stalls tip. Vendors scatter. Julian hears it—

a name yelled. A shove.
Then the pop.

Not just one. Two. Maybe three.

*He turns toward the sound—not away. His first instinct, always, is to move toward pain.

And that's where we fade into the already-written scene—

Julian approaching Rae, not with fear, but with presence.
Being shot.
Still stepping forward.

The world freezing.
Luke arriving.
And everything coming undone.

Julian took the first bullet to the side.

The flea market buzz had scattered into screams. Stalls overturned. Fruit crushed under panicked feet. Somewhere, a wind chime clanged from a fallen booth — an eerie echo of the peace that used to be here.

But Rae still hadn't moved.

He saw it in her eyes — the war inside her. Not rage, but memory. All the ghosts with voices that sounded like her father, her foster mom, the cops who called her a boy, the teachers who called her a problem.

Julian took another step.

The gun fired again.

This one caught him in the shoulder — high, near the collarbone. The force of it spun him slightly, and for a breath he thought his knees would give.
But he didn't fall.

Because he'd seen this before — not in markets, not with guns — but in Efraín's eyes.

That moment right before the scream.
When the pain inside someone reaches a frequency only the desperate can hear.

He steadied himself. Blood soaked his shirt now, warmth fading into cold.

And then—he reached her.

No words. Just arms.

Rae stood stiff as a corpse.

Until she wasn't.

Until her fingers dropped the gun, her shoulders buckled, and she pressed her face into his chest like a child who forgot what comfort felt like.

Julian held her like he used to hold Efraín after a meltdown — no demands, no fear.
Just presence.

———

Sirens drowned the air. Tires screeched. Radios blared.

And then—SWAT.

Boots thundered over broken displays and spilled snacks. Shouts pierced the chaos.

"DROP THE WEAPON!"

"ON THE GROUND—NOW!"

But all they saw was blood.
A man holding a girl. A gun on the ground. A scene, not a story.

Julian turned his head—too slow.

Kyle was the first to reach him.

He didn't ask.
Didn't scan.
Didn't feel.

He went full cop. Eliminate the threat.

His shoulder smashed into Julian's back, driving him down.

Another officer joined — a knee to Julian's ribs.
Hands pulled at his wounded arm.

Julian gasped — pain flashed white. The world bent sideways. He tasted dirt and iron.

Somewhere behind him, Rae didn't run.

She stayed kneeling — watching the man who took two bullets for her now being crushed like the monster.

And she broke.

Not into violence.
Into clarity.

"He's not the shooter!"

"It was me!"

Her voice tore through the air — raw, wild.
Again. And again.

Until someone finally looked.

Luke.

Helmet off. Vest half-zipped. Breath caught in his throat.

The moment his eyes landed on Julian, everything stopped.

The man on the ground — bloodied, breathless — was the one he had loved. The one he had pushed away. The one he had refused to claim.

Now, held down by his own brothers, for doing what none of them

could.

Luke didn't move.

But Kyle did.

Still pressing Julian into the gravel, face hard, voice flat:

"He was holding the weapon. What more do you need?"

Luke's voice cracked open — hoarse, barely human:

"I need you to get off him."

Kyle looked up, surprised.

That was all it took. A pause. A seed of doubt. A crack in the performance.

And in that crack — everything began to fall.

—

Luke saw the blood before he saw the face.

The red-soaked shirt. The collapsed girl. The shouting.

Then—Julian.

And the floor dropped out.

He was supposed to be a threat. That's what Kyle had said.
"Shooter's still active. One down, one unidentified."

But this wasn't active.

This was aftermath. This was surrender.
This was Julian.

Luke froze in the middle of the chaos — a statue in uniform.

He didn't remember drawing his weapon. Or running in.
He remembered only Kyle's voice in his ear:
"Don't hesitate. The minute you do, someone dies."

That voice had always felt like truth. Like brotherhood.
The kind that made you feel safe.
Until now.

Because Kyle wasn't looking — not really.

He saw a body and a gun and filled in the rest with fear.

Luke saw Julian.

Eyes half-lidded. Blood running in delicate threads down his temple.
Still. Breathing. Barely.

But he knew him. The way you only know someone when you've loved them with your guard down.

And it hit him—how fast it all can slip.
How close he came to never seeing him again.
Not really seeing him.

And worse—how much he had helped write this moment.

He had left him. Shut him out.
Not to protect Julian — but to protect himself.

He'd traded love for armor, truth for safety.

Now Kyle knelt over the man who had done what Luke couldn't —
Stayed soft in a world designed to harden you.

Luke's hands shook.

He didn't speak like a cop. Not this time.

His voice cracked open from somewhere before the training, before the badge, before the script.

"I need you to get off him."

Kyle glanced up, amused.

"You freezing up now? You know what that looks like, right?"

But Luke wasn't listening anymore.

He was stepping forward. Past the doubt. Past the image he'd spent years trying to fit.
Every step cracked the shell he'd built around himself.

Julian, broken and bleeding, had walked into a loaded gun without flinching.

And he—

He had flinched at love.

Kyle stood up slowly, like a man indulging a tantrum.

He didn't take his hands off Julian right away.
Not until the weight in Luke's voice finally registered.
Not anger. Not orders.

Conviction.

Kyle rose, arms out slightly, smirking like this was just another joke Luke wasn't in on.

"You serious right now?"
He nodded toward Julian. "He had the damn gun."

Rae's voice cut through.

"He took it from me."

Kyle turned, looked at her for the first time. Really looked. Saw the streaks on her face, the trembling hands. The gun on the concrete, not in her grip.

And something flickered. Just for a second.
Doubt, maybe. Or disbelief that the world wasn't bending to his certainty anymore.

Luke stepped past him.

Kneeled.

He didn't touch Julian — not yet. Just hovered there.
Close enough to feel the heat of his wounds.
Close enough to see his lips move — trying, failing, to form words.

"I'm here," Luke whispered.
Julian's eyelids fluttered.
Then shut.

But his fingers curled ever so slightly — a reflex, or maybe a signal.
Luke didn't know.

But he stayed.

Even when the radio barked for confirmation.
Even when Kyle muttered, "You've changed, man," like it was an insult.

Even when the team stood frozen, waiting for someone — anyone — to make a call.

Luke didn't move.

Because there was nothing left to prove. Not to Kyle. Not to the badge.

Only one thing left to hold.

And he did — Julian's hand, slick with blood, but still warm.
Still alive.

———

Rae watched it all.

How quickly monsters were named.
How slowly truth was believed.

How Julian — the boy who walked into a bullet just to reach her — had changed them all without firing a single shot.

And how love, fragile as it looked, had done what fear never could.

It made them see.

Kyle didn't budge.

Julian was still pinned.

And Luke…
He couldn't move at first. Not because he was frozen — but because his body felt foreign.

The vest. The badge. The holster digging into his ribs.

Everything that once made him feel powerful now felt like someone else's skin.

Julian was bleeding out.
And he'd done nothing.
Worse — he'd believed it.

Even after Rae screamed the truth, part of him still hesitated.
Still looked for some reason to doubt Julian.
Still looked for a way to protect himself.

Because if Julian was innocent, then he was guilty.

Guilty of walking away.
Of hardening.
Of choosing silence over love.

Julian hadn't just taken a bullet.

He'd walked into it — with the same wide-open heart Luke had tried so hard to shut out.

And now that heart was barely beating on the concrete.

Luke knelt, almost collapsing.

His hands hovered over Julian's chest, trembling.

“I should’ve stopped this,” he whispered.

No one heard it. No one needed to.

It wasn’t for them.

It was for the boy he loved. The one he’d left behind in the name of fitting in, falling in line, and surviving.

Now survival felt like a curse.

Julian’s blood soaked into Luke’s knees.
It didn’t matter. Nothing else mattered.

He dropped his head — forehead brushing Julian’s temple — and for a second he thought he could will him awake, just by staying close.

“I see you,” he whispered. “I always did… I just didn’t know how to love you out loud.”

His voice cracked — not like a soldier breaking.
Like a boy who never learned how to cry.

And for the first time in years, he did.

Not in front of the mirror.
Not behind a locked door.
But here, in the dirt, in front of everyone.

In front of Kyle.
In front of God.

He wept for the love he couldn’t name.
For the safety he’d mistaken for salvation.
For the way he had worn strength like a costume and called it character.

Kyle stared, silent.

Luke didn’t look up.

Let them see him.

Let them see all of him.

Because if Julian could bleed for love in front of the world,
then maybe — finally —
Luke could live for it.

Julian faded in and out.

Bright lights. Voices. Sirens like screaming angels.

The ambulance doors slammed shut.

Pressure on his chest. A needle in his arm. Someone yelling numbers.

His body shook with every bump in the road, pain blooming deeper each time.
It felt like falling — not fast, but endlessly.

A face leaned over him.
He wanted it to be Luke.

But it was a stranger in blue gloves, eyes focused, mouth moving.

Julian couldn't hear the words.
Only the sound of his own heartbeat — slowing.

He thought of Efraín.

Of the way he used to hold him when the storms came.
Of Rae's trembling hands.
Of Luke's face — just before everything went dark.

And then he slipped under again.

———

Luke didn't wait for protocol.

He tossed the radio to a backup officer and took off running — helmet in hand, vest half-unzipped, breath ragged.

His legs barely carried him.

People moved aside as he bolted down the flea market corridor, then the street. Sirens cut through the sky like threads pulling him toward the truth.

Julian was dying.

And Luke wasn't ready.
Not to let go.
Not to live with what he hadn't said.

———

He reached the hospital before the ambulance.

By the time they rolled Julian through, Luke was already at the ER doors, hands pressed against the glass.

"Is he here yet?"
"I need to see him—"

The nurse didn't even look up. "Family only."

"I—he's—" Luke stammered. "Please, I'm—"

But the words died.
Because he wasn't his family. Not by law. Not by form. Not by name.

He stepped back.

The gurney came through.
A blur of red and white and blue.

And Julian—barely a shadow, tubes snaking from his body, face gone pale.

Luke moved like he might follow.

Security stepped in.

“I’m sorry, sir. You’ll have to wait in the lobby.”

He didn’t fight it.
Didn’t have the strength.

He slumped into a corner seat, soaked in sweat and sirens, trying to keep breathing.

———

The doors burst open twenty minutes later.

A woman and man rushed in — the woman still tying her hair back, the man fumbling to explain in Spanish.

“Nos llamaron—nuestro hijo, Julian—dijeron que estaba aquí—”

Luke knew immediately.

The way her voice cracked on Julian’s name.
The way the man kept repeating “¿Dónde está?” like saying it faster might summon him.

Luke stood instinctively, but stayed hidden behind the column.

He couldn’t bear to interrupt.

A nurse met them. She didn’t have answers — only that a doctor would come soon.

Julian’s mother paced in small circles, one hand on her chest, the other clutching the sleeve of her husband’s jacket like it was the only thing holding her up.

Luke watched her.

The same hands that must’ve fed Julian as a child.
Held him after nightmares.
Braided his hair when it was still soft and curly.

Now they shook with not knowing.

And then—
The doctor arrived.

———

“We’re doing everything we can,” he said.

But Luke could hear the code behind the words.
A language of controlled panic.
Too much blood loss.
The shoulder. The side.
Lung, maybe. Artery, likely.

“He’s in surgery now. But I have to be honest—”

And that’s when Julian’s mother collapsed.

Not to the ground — but into herself.
The kind of collapse that doesn’t make a sound but crushes everything inside.

Julian’s father caught her, but barely.
His own face cracked — not with tears, but with silence. A man taught not to cry, now unmade by the fear of losing his son.

Luke couldn’t breathe.

He backed away from the column, walked slowly out of sight.
Sat down again.

His body shook. Not with grief — not yet.

With guilt.
For every second wasted.
For every word unspoken.
For not being allowed in — because he had chosen never to be seen.

Luke sat for what felt like hours.

The hospital smelled like bleach and waiting.
Plastic chairs. Soft overhead announcements. The occasional cart rolling by.

Julian's parents hadn't moved far. They sat across the lobby now, holding each other — quiet except for the sound of her sobs rising and falling like waves.

Luke had never met them.

But he knew them.

He knew everything.

Julian talked about them constantly — in those soft, lazy moments after they made love, or on nights when Luke pretended not to listen too closely.

He knew his mom put cinnamon in her coffee and cried during game shows.
He knew his dad wore too much cologne and taught Julian to dance by spinning him in the kitchen to old boleros.
He knew their Sunday ritual was homemade tamales, even in the summer.
He knew Julian called them Mama and Papa, even as an adult, and never said it with irony.

He had told Luke everything — because he wanted Luke to be part of it.

And Luke had always nodded, smiled, listened.

But he never showed up.

Never asked to meet them.
Never let the conversations go past the edges of safe.

Because if he met Julian's family… it would become real.
Not just desire. Not just escape.

Love.

And Luke had spent his whole life afraid of what love might cost him.

Now, it might cost him Julian.

———

He stood up.

His legs felt numb, like he was moving through water.

Julian's mother sat alone now, rocking slightly, hands twisted in her lap.
His father stood at the front desk, asking another question that would go unanswered.

Luke walked toward her.

Each step heavier than the last.
His heart pounded so loudly he barely heard his own voice when he spoke.

"Señora?"

She looked up.

Her eyes were red. Her mouth parted slightly, confused.

Luke froze.

He forgot the Spanish. Forgot everything he'd rehearsed in his head for the past twenty minutes.

"I—" he started. "I'm Luke."

Blank stare.

"I'm…" He looked down. "I was… I am… someone who loves your son."

Her lips parted again. This time with breath. Not recognition — just air.

Luke knelt beside her chair.

“I should’ve met you a long time ago,” he said. “He wanted me to. He talked about you all the time.”

Her brow knit. She didn’t speak. But she didn’t pull away.

“He said you made the best pozole. That you danced in the kitchen with him when he was little. That you used to tell him he had an old soul.”
Luke smiled, a broken thing. “He said you cried during Wheel of Fortune once.”

She blinked.

A tear slipped down her cheek — silent.

Luke continued. “I knew all of it. I just… I wasn’t ready to be real. To be seen.”

And then, quieter:
“I was scared. And now I might be too late.”

Julian’s mother looked at him. Really looked.

And she did something Luke didn’t expect.

She reached out. Just a hand on his arm.

Not forgiveness. Not understanding.

Just… connection.
The only thing she had left to give.

And it undid him.
“The Space Between”

They sat in a triangle of silence — Luke, Julian’s mama, and Julian’s papa — in a patch of fluorescent light just off the main corridor.

It was awkward.

Not the kind of awkward you fix with small talk.
The kind that hovers like a ghost, fed by everything that wasn't said.

Julian's father had returned from the front desk and now sat beside his wife, casting long, sidelong glances at Luke. He hadn't spoken a word to him yet.

Luke fidgeted with the strap of his vest — unsure if he should still be wearing it.
He hadn't taken it off because… what else was there to take off?

He cleared his throat. "I, uh… I'm sorry."

It came out too soft. He hated the way it sounded — like it wasn't enough.

Julian's mother nodded slowly. "You were with him?"

Luke hesitated. "Not when it happened. I… came after."

A beat.

Julian's father finally spoke. His voice was gravel. "You're a cop?"

Luke nodded.

Another silence. This one sharper.

He felt their grief wrap itself around him like a question: So were you part of the ones who hurt him?

Before he could speak again—

His radio crackled to life.

"Unit 6, copy—Suspect Rae Jamison now in custody. Code Gray cleared at location. En route to County Holding."

The sound cut through him like a blade.

Rae.

His jaw tightened. His breath caught.

She had done this. She had pulled Julian into it. Had made him a body on a gurney.
She had looked him in the eye and still pulled the trigger.

And yet…

Julian had held her.

He had walked into her pain — not with force, but with arms open.
The only one brave enough to face it without trying to silence it.
Without trying to win.

And now he was the one in surgery.
The one mistaken for the threat.
The one Kyle slammed into the ground like he was nothing but a problem to neutralize.

It hurt. God, it hurt.

Luke's throat closed. He tried to swallow, but it felt like gravel.

Then Julian's father turned to him, quieter now.

"What happened?"

Luke looked at them both.

And for the first time, he couldn't hide behind the uniform, the radio, the badge.

He had nothing prepared.

"I…" he started. But his voice cracked.

He looked at them — really looked — and it hit him:

They didn't know yet.
Not just the what, but the how. The why.

How their son had faced a gun with compassion.

How he'd been tackled for it.
How Luke hadn't stopped it.

His eyes brimmed.

"I don't know if I can explain it," he said. "I haven't… I haven't even processed it."

He looked away, biting back the burn behind his eyes.

"He walked into something none of us knew how to hold. Rae was —she was ready to die or kill or both, and he just… reached her."

Julian's mother began to cry again, soft and breathless.

Luke's voice dropped lower. "He didn't shout. Didn't fight. He just stood there — bleeding — trying to love someone back from the edge."

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"And Kyle…" His voice nearly failed. "He treated him like a criminal. Like the danger. No questions. Just force."

Luke shook his head. "Julian wasn't the threat. He was the only one who wasn't trying to control the chaos. He just held space for it."

He looked down at his shaking hands.

"And we broke him for it."

No one spoke for a while.

The doctor held the door open for Julian's parents.

But as Luke stepped forward behind them, the doctor gently raised a hand.

"I'm sorry," he said, calm but firm. "Family only."

Luke stopped mid-step.

And for the first time in his life — really the first — he felt what it was to be denied entry.

Not because of a rule.
But because he didn't fit the form.

He didn't have the right name.
He hadn't filled out the right boxes.
He hadn't claimed Julian when it would've mattered.

And now — when he was finally trying — the door was closed.

He stood there, stunned by how much it hurt.

It wasn't just about seeing Julian. It was the quiet shame of realizing: this was unfamiliar to him.

He'd spent his life walking through doors.
Being waved through.
Being assumed safe.
Being assumed right.

Even as a cop — especially as a cop — he'd been taught that presence was permission.

But not here.

Here, love didn't buy access.
And privilege couldn't mask omission.

He nodded, stepping back, swallowing it down like medicine.

Already preparing to wait in the lobby. Already used to retreating to the sidelines of his own heart.

But just as the door began to close—

Julian's mother turned.

She looked back at him with that quiet, maternal clarity — the kind that sees things before you say them.

She placed a hand gently on the doctor's arm.

"Él entra también," she said. He comes too.

The doctor glanced at her, then at Luke.

And then nodded.

Luke didn't move for a second.

Something in him — the part that always backed down from love, that mistook shame for safety — wanted to turn around.

But Julian's father gave a small, silent nod.
That was all it took.

Luke stepped through the door.

"The Room"

The ICU hummed with low beeps and recycled air.

Sterile. Still.

And there, beneath the blue cast of machine lights — Julian.

Unmoving.

Tubes threaded from his mouth. IV lines curled into his arm.
His skin looked pale and distant, bruising dark against the stark white gown.

Luke froze.

This wasn't the man who'd kissed him under moonlight in the cab of his truck.
This wasn't the man who stood in the middle of a flea market with a bullet in his chest and compassion in his eyes.

This was the cost.

Julian's mother moved first, gently brushing his leg — the only place left untouched.
She collapsed into prayer, head bowed, tears dropping silently onto the blanket.

Julian's father stood behind her, still. Hands trembling, jaw tight.

Luke lingered at the door again — that familiar ache rising. The one

that said: This is not your place.

But then—

Julian's mother turned.

She looked over at Luke and, with a faint nod, said:
"Ven."
Come.

Luke stepped forward. His heart pounded.

Every footstep was an apology.

He stopped at the other side of the bed.

Julian's eyes didn't flutter. His chest rose and fell with borrowed breath.

Luke reached out and set his hand beside Julian's.

No more hiding. No more pretending.

"I'm here," he whispered.

The machines clicked on. The monitors blinked.
And in the space between all that sound, Luke finally felt the quiet answer he had spent years running from:

He had always belonged here.

He'd just been too afraid to knock.

The room settled into a rhythm.

Not the kind you dance to.

The kind you wait with.

Beep.

Hiss.
Beep.
Silence.

The machines did what Julian's body could not — breathe, circulate, fight.

Julian's mother had stopped crying but hadn't moved. Her hand still rested on her son's shin, eyes vacant and glassy, lips moving in quiet prayer.

Julian's father had taken a seat in the corner, rosary in one hand, unmoving.

Luke stood still.

The room felt wrapped in gauze — soundless and slow. Like they were all sitting inside the pause between thunder and the rain that always follows.

This was it.
The waiting.
The cloud of unknowing.

And then—Luke's phone vibrated.

He flinched, like the sound didn't belong in this world.

He pulled it from his pocket. One message:

Colton:
"Bro… are you okay? I saw you. It's all over the news."

Luke stared at the screen.
Thumb hovered. Then tapped back.

Luke:
"I'm fine. Kind of. What are they saying?"

Seconds later:

Colton:
"Turn on the news. Channel 7. Now."

———

Luke slipped quietly out into the hallway and looked up at the TV in the waiting room.
The news anchor's voice chirped in, cheerful and bright — still halfway in morning-show mode.

"—and next, we'll talk about ways to beat the heat this week, but first…"

A pause.
Her smile faltered.

"We need to shift gears for a moment. The following contains graphic content and may be disturbing to some viewers."

Luke's breath slowed.

On screen, the image cut to a shaky cell phone recording.

The angle was high — someone standing near the fruit stall, halfway hidden.
The video began just after the first shot.

Screams.
People ducking. Running.

And in the center of the chaos — Julian.

Blood already blooming at his side, but he moved forward.
Toward Rae.
Step by step.

The camera zoomed slightly, just enough to see her hands shaking, the gun swaying.

Then the second shot.

Julian staggered but didn't fall.

He kept going.

Luke's heart broke all over again.

The screen showed it all — Julian reaching her, arms outstretched.
The gun falling.
Rae collapsing into him.

And then—

Kyle.

Charging in like a storm.
No pause. No scan.
Just force.

He slammed Julian to the ground so hard the phone camera jolted.
People screamed again.

Luke's own voice rang out faintly in the background, distorted by chaos:

"He's not the shooter!"

The clip ended.

Back in the studio, the camera returned to the anchor.

But she didn't speak.

She blinked, once.

Her mouth opened, closed again.

Behind her, the cheerful background music had cut off.

A beat passed.
Then another.

Still — nothing.

It wasn't awkward.
It wasn't technical difficulty.

It was reverence.

A silence not born of fear, but knowing.

Something had cracked open.

The grief was too real.
The footage too raw.
Julian's walk — too holy.

It was as if the whole room, the whole city, the whole nation—
paused.

The collective consciousness stopped turning the page.

Because for once, a story wasn't finished.

It wasn't digestible.
Wasn't clean.

It asked something. Demanded it, even.

Stay with this.
Feel it.
Don't look away.

Luke stood in that hallway, screen still glowing in his hand, breath caught in his throat.

His body buzzed with grief. With rage.
With awe.

He looked back through the window into Julian's room.

And whispered, just to himself:

"…They see you now."

—

For a moment, the world held its breath.

But moments like that don't last long.

The stillness that followed the footage — that sacred, rare stillness

where everything felt — began to splinter, as it always does.

Because the public is not built to hold pain in silence.

It flinches.
It explains.
It chooses a side.

And quickly, the story stopped being Julian.

It became a symbol.
A headline.
A weapon.

The left lit up first — hashtags, reposts, outrage.

#JulianWasTheHero
#CompassionNotControl
#DefundKyle

They marched with signs bearing Julian's blood-soaked image, his arms outstretched in grainy stills like a modern saint. They screamed justice. They screamed reform. They screamed his name — sometimes louder than they meant to listen to it.

And the right — not the quiet right, not the everyday people with uncertainty in their hearts, but the loud right — came roaring back with pride bruised and fists clenched.

"We don't know the whole story."
"He approached the shooter — that's suspicious."
"Don't villainize a cop who was doing his job."

Kyle's face appeared on conservative talk shows. Blurry, scrubbed, sanctified.

They called him a protector.

They said the real danger was the narrative.

And so, the mob — once quiet, once moved — turned against itself.

Not because of Julian.

But because they didn't know how to stay in the ache.

They needed direction. A villain. A win.

They turned to the old dance:
Right vs. Left.
Law vs. Chaos.
Us vs. Them.

Protests turned to riots.
Memorials were defaced by counter-protesters who claimed Julian's act was staged.
Conspiracy threads unraveled like wildfire.

And somewhere in the middle, the truth — the living, breathing, bleeding truth — began to fade again.

Because nuance doesn't trend.

———

What Julian did wasn't strategic.

It wasn't political.

He didn't plan it for a movement or a party or a slogan.

He moved toward Rae because she was human.

He bled for her because he saw something no one else had time to see.

And in doing so, he cracked the world open.

But a cracked world is uncomfortable. And most people, when they feel that discomfort, don't lean in.

They look for someone to blame.

———

From the hospital, Luke watched the headlines change by the hour.

He saw the footage replayed in every possible framing.
Theories. Think pieces. Talking heads.

He saw Kyle hailed as a patriot in one article and crucified as a thug in another.

But no one — not a single commentator — talked about Julian's silence.

The moment he held Rae.

The moment he chose presence over power.

That wasn't in the trending clips.
It was too quiet. Too sacred.

And sacredness doesn't sell.

Luke sat by Julian's bed, one hand on the blanket.

Outside, the world was screaming.

Inside, the machines kept their rhythm.

And Luke knew —
The real revolution didn't look like fire in the streets.

It looked like this:
A man refusing to hate.
A body refusing to stay down.
A love refusing to be erased.

—

Julian didn't wake up.

Not that day.
Not the next.
Not for two weeks.

He slipped into a coma — the doctors called it medically induced at first, then unexplained, then expected.
A natural response, they said, to trauma that shattered both body and mind.

But there was nothing natural about it to Luke.

He came every day.

Every morning after roll call, every evening after his shift — sometimes still in uniform, sometimes not. He'd sit by Julian's side, one hand always within reach of his.

He didn't say much.
Not at first.

Just sat in silence, trying to keep the world still around him. Trying to hold space the way Julian had — without expectation, without force.

Sometimes he'd read aloud from Julian's favorite books — poetry, the kind Luke used to tease him for, now memorized from repetition.

Other days he'd talk to Julian like nothing had happened — about the mess on the news, about Colton being surprisingly thoughtful, about Julian's mom teaching Luke how to make pozole in the cafeteria microwave.

And sometimes he said nothing at all.

Just sat there, counting the beeps of the heart monitor like they were seconds left in a war he didn't know how to win.

———

The nurses started to recognize him.

They stopped asking who he was.
Started leaving a chair by the bed.
Sometimes even brought him coffee.

Julian's parents came in shifts.
Mama during the day, praying and humming softly while holding Julian's hand.
Papa in the evening, sitting quietly, eyes closed, lips pressed to a worn rosary.

But Luke was the one who stayed between.
He became the bridge.
The witness.

He didn't try to make sense of things anymore.
Didn't try to outthink the pain.

He just showed up.

Because if Julian could step forward into bullets with nothing but his heart open,
then the least Luke could do was sit still and love him through the quiet.

———

Outside, the world moved on — protests gave way to politics, clips gave way to new clips, names were replaced with new ones.

But in Room 418 of the ICU, time held its breath.

And Luke kept showing up.

Not for recognition.
Not to be a hero.
Not to erase what he hadn't done before.

But because this time — finally — he wasn't afraid to stay.

Julian woke to light.

Not the dramatic kind — not some sacred beam from heaven or

slow cinematic glow.

Just sterile, sharp, hospital white.

His throat burned.
His chest ached.
His limbs felt like sandbags.

And for a moment, he wasn't sure he'd returned to his body at all.

———

Voices filtered in — muffled, professional.

A nurse.

A doctor.

His mother's soft sob just outside the door.

But Julian's mind wasn't ready for faces.

It filled in the blanks with memory — jagged and out of order.

The flea market.
Rae's eyes.
The sound of the second gunshot.
And then—impact.

The ground rushing up. The weight. The pain.
A knee.
A voice shouting commands.
Hands that didn't ask — just took.

His body had been held.
But not gently.

And in the blur — Kyle's face loomed.

Hard. Cold. Decisive.

Threat eliminated.

But trauma doesn't always remember faces clearly.

Sometimes it substitutes.

Kyle's voice had the same edge as Luke's when he'd walked away.
The same force.

Julian's mind, still raw and reeling, confused the two.

Somewhere in his subconscious, it stitched a truth that wasn't quite real — but felt real enough:

Luke didn't stop him.
Luke had left.
Luke had chosen the pack.

And now, waking in the half-light, surrounded by machines and loss, Julian's heart filled with silence — not rage, not vengeance.

Something more complex.

———

He didn't cry.

Not yet.

Instead, he stared at the ceiling and breathed shallowly.

Trying to piece himself together.

Trying not to flinch at the memory of metal and bone.
Trying not to chase the pain back to its source.

He let the thoughts come like waves and let them go again.

Luke had walked away before.
He had chosen survival over truth.
He had chosen not to stay.

That memory was real.

The rest — the violence, the slam to the ground, the roughness — was murkier.
But it was all soaked in the same ache.

And so Julian did the only thing he knew how to do:

He gave it space.

He didn't try to judge it or make it neat.

He let the confusion exist beside the pain.

He didn't let vengeance in. Not fully.
But he didn't deny the fracture, either.

Luke, he thought, wasn't who I needed him to be.

And that hurt more than the wound in his chest.

———

Luke was across town.

On call. Body present, but mind in that room — always.

He didn't know Julian had opened his eyes.
Didn't know that the moment he'd been praying for had finally come.

He didn't know that Julian was awake…

And already trying to decide whether to open his heart again
—or close it for good.

—

Julian's eyelids fluttered again.

This time, he didn't fade.

This time, he stayed.

The door opened quietly, but it might as well have been a dam breaking.

"Mijo…"

His mother's voice broke the air like a hymn.

And then she was there — at his bedside, kissing his forehead, brushing his hair back with trembling hands. Her tears fell freely, landing on his cheeks like blessings.

"Gracias a Dios," she whispered over and over. "Gracias a Dios…"

Julian turned his head slowly, wincing at the pain it stirred.

"Papa?"

"I'm here, son." His father stepped into view, voice thick with emotion, trying — and failing — to appear composed. "We're both here."

Julian tried to smile. It barely held.

"How long?" His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

His mother wiped her eyes, squeezing his hand. "You've been resting for two weeks."

Two weeks.

It sank in like a stone.

And then — just as quickly — Julian's mind turned outward.

He blinked hard. "Efraín…"

His mother leaned in, brow furrowed. "What, mijo?"

"Efraín — who's been… who's with him?"

His voice cracked with urgency. That familiar anxiety — the deep-rooted responsibility — pressing through his fog.

“Is he okay? He… he needs his routines.”

His mother smiled through tears, brushing his cheek.

“Shhh. He’s okay. He’s okay. Tía Rosa came. She’s been staying with him. Every day.”

Julian exhaled — a long, shaky breath.

The knot in his chest loosened just enough.

Because Efraín — his brother, his mirror, his tether to the world — needed more than love. He needed attention. He needed someone who knew how to speak in silence, how to follow his unspoken rhythm.

Julian had been that person.

And in this moment — even half-broken, barely stitched back together — that instinct remained.

Love first. Always.

———

His father sat down in the chair beside him, pulling it close.

“You don’t have to worry about anything but getting better,” he said gently.

Julian nodded faintly. But inside, the worry hadn’t vanished — it had simply made space. For Efraín. For Rae. For himself.

He had stepped back into a world that was still spinning.
And it would take time to learn where — or who — he was in it now.

But for now, he was held.

By familiar hands.
By quiet voices.
By the people who had never stopped waiting for him to return.

“Processing Rae”

Julian lay still, eyes half-focused on the ceiling.

The soft beep of the heart monitor had become a kind of metronome — keeping pace with the swirl of thoughts slowly rising through the fog.

He hadn’t asked about Luke yet.

He wasn’t ready.

But Rae…
Rae came forward, uninvited.

The memory of her face — hollow, trembling, haunted — surfaced like a bruise he couldn’t stop pressing.

She shot him.

Not once.
Twice.

And his mind, still tender and scrambled, tried to make sense of that truth.

A part of him — the part wired for survival — wanted to name her villain.
To paint her in sharp lines.
To keep the memory clean and easy:

She hurt me.
She saw me and still pulled the trigger.
She chose it.

That part of his brain wasn’t cruel. It was protective.
It was building fences.
It was saying: Don’t touch the hot stove again.

He felt that impulse — raw and instinctive — wanting to seal her away behind blame.

But deeper than that…
Something else stirred.

Something slower. Sadder.
Not forgiving — not yet — but seeing.

He remembered the look in her eyes.
Right before the first shot.

Not rage.

Panic.

Not power.

Collapse.

He remembered how her hands shook. How her voice was barely a whisper when she told him to stop.

She wasn't thinking like a soldier.
She wasn't making demands.
She was unraveling.

He saw it clearly now — the ache behind the aim.
A girl who had never been held when she needed it.
Who had grown up being hurt and taught to strike first before someone else did.

And she had looked at him — not as Julian, not as a man, not as a heart — but as a threat.

Because in her world, love wasn't safe.
Nothing was.

———

Julian blinked, letting a tear fall sideways down his temple.

He didn’t try to erase what she did.

He didn’t excuse it.

But he didn’t let it rot him, either.

He let the grief speak.

She hurt me.
And…
She didn’t know what else to do.

He whispered aloud — barely more than breath:

“She wasn’t trying to kill me. She was trying to survive me.”

His father looked over but didn’t ask.
He didn’t need to.

Julian wasn’t speaking to anyone but the ache in his own soul —
the part that wanted to fight pain with pain
and the deeper part that refused.

—

Julian’s eyelids drifted halfway shut.

The ache in his body had dulled to something distant — still there, but folded under layers of medicine and exhaustion.

But inside…
He wasn’t still.

Luke’s name kept rising.

He hadn’t asked yet. Not aloud.

But the wanting was there — low and constant, like a pulse behind his ribs.

Was he there?
Did he come?
Did he leave again?

His mind kept circling back — retracing old steps, old words.

The breakup.
The silence.
The way Luke had hardened just before everything broke.

And worse — the way Julian still loved him anyway.

Even now.

Even after the pain.
Even after the blur of violence, where Kyle's face overlapped with Luke's in his confused, fractured memory.

He wanted to ask.

He wanted someone to say, "He never left."
That he had waited.
That maybe this meant something still.

But another part of him — the deepest, clearest part — whispered something else.

You don't need to know.

Because loving Luke had always meant letting him be where he needed to be.

And that was never something Julian had tried to control.

It wasn't detachment.
It wasn't resignation.

It was a kind of reverence.

He had loved Luke openly — fiercely, without shame — even when Luke couldn't meet him there.
Even when Luke was still drowning in the armor he'd inherited from a world that punished softness in men like him.

Julian had made peace with who Luke had been.

And now, he had to make peace with who Luke might never become.

He stared at the ceiling for a long time — the hospital lights dim now, casting long shadows across the bed.

Then, quietly — as if setting down something sacred:

“I let you go.”

He didn’t say it bitterly.
Didn’t say it as a final strike.
There was no drama in the release.

Just stillness.
And love — still there, but no longer clinging.

A breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding escaped his chest.

And for the first time since he’d woken, his body sank deeper into the bed.

The rhythm of the monitors softened in his ears.

His fingers relaxed.
His jaw unclenched.

And sleep — real sleep, not the unconscious fog of trauma — finally came.

—

The room was quiet again.

Soft clicks and distant hallway murmurs blurred into the background, like a radio tuned between stations.

Julian stared at the ceiling.

He wasn't looking at anything. He was feeling through something.

Luke.

He hadn't asked about him. Not yet.

But the question was there — curled at the edge of every breath.

Had he come?

Had he cared?

Was he still afraid?

Julian's throat tightened. Not from the tube that had once been there — but from the ache of not knowing.

He wanted to ask.
To hear someone say, "He never left your side."
To feel what it might be like to be chosen again — even after the blood, even after the silence.

But he didn't ask.

Because deep down, he already knew the answer wouldn't change the thing that mattered most:

Luke had been afraid of him.

Afraid of what Julian's love might unlock.
Afraid of what it might cost to let go of the version of himself that fit the world better than he ever could.

And Julian… he couldn't carry that anymore.

He couldn't keep loving Luke in the shape of a waiting room chair.
Couldn't keep his heart suspended in a maybe that never arrived.

He had walked into Rae's pain with open arms.
He had survived a bullet for someone who didn't know how to receive love.

And now…
He had to survive the silence left by someone who did.

———

He exhaled slowly.

Not in bitterness.

Not in defeat.

But in acceptance.

“I love you,” he thought.
And then:
“I don’t need you to love me back.”

His body softened.

Like letting go wasn’t a falling apart — but a return to something whole.

He could feel it now:
The grief, yes. But also the quiet miracle of not needing to hold on anymore.

———

He blinked once.

The ceiling blurred.
His limbs felt heavy again — not with sadness, but surrender.

And as the thought of Luke drifted gently out of his chest like mist, something else entered:

Peace.

Not the kind that announces itself.
The kind that simply is.

A warmth behind the eyes.
A silence without weight.

And then—finally—

Julian closed his eyes.

And slept.

For real this time.

Luke's phone buzzed against the metal bench inside the precinct locker room.

He was halfway through unlacing his boots when he checked it.

Nurse Jordan
"Hey. Off the record. He woke up."

Luke's breath stopped.

His pulse spiked so fast it felt like his chest couldn't hold it.

He stared at the screen, reading it again just to be sure.

He woke up.

No explanation. No long message.
Just a simple truth — handed over in quiet defiance of hospital policy.

Technically, yeah — it probably wasn't protocol. Maybe even against HIPAA.

But after two weeks of seeing Luke show up every day, sit quietly at Julian's side, and leave without asking for anything…

Jordan had decided this wasn't about rules anymore.
It was about love.

Luke stood there, the locker room suddenly too small.
Too quiet.

Julian was awake.

And Luke had no idea what that meant — not for them, not for him. But he knew he needed to go.

———

He walked out of the locker room and found his commander finishing coffee in the break room.
Sergeant Walters — thick mustache, heavy hands, the kind of guy who usually didn't do feelings unless they were attached to team loyalty or loss.

"Hey, Sarge," Luke said, voice dry. "Mind if I step out for a bit?"

Walters raised an eyebrow. "Everything alright?"

Luke hesitated.
Then let the words come out — raw, simple, unguarded.

"Julian's awake. I'd like to go see him."

A pause.

Something passed across the sergeant's face — not judgment, but awareness.

Most of the department had pieced it together after the incident.
The look on Luke's face when Julian was tackled.
The way he screamed when Kyle slammed him down.
The silence that followed — not just shock, but loss.

No one said anything out loud.

But the shift had already happened.

"Take the rest of the day," Walters said, voice softer than expected.

Luke blinked. "Yeah?"

Walters gave him a small shrug. "Look, kid. Not everyone's gonna get it. And not everyone's gonna like it. But that man walked into a bullet trying to save someone."

He sipped his coffee. "He's earned a visitor."

Then, with something that almost resembled a smirk:

“Don’t make us look soft.”

Luke gave a small laugh. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

———

As Luke walked through the hallway toward the front exit, he passed a few of the guys.

They didn’t say much.

One clapped him on the back.
Another gave him a nod.
A third muttered, “Glad he pulled through.”

And even the ones who didn’t say anything didn’t sneer.
Didn’t scoff.

They just let him walk.

And for the first time, Luke realized something simple:

Maybe the world didn’t hate him as much as he thought.
Maybe he was the one who’d been too afraid to find out.

———

He tossed his vest into his backseat, clipped his badge to the visor, and pulled out of the station lot with the engine rumbling low beneath him.

The city was glowing in late afternoon gold.
He turned onto the main road toward the hospital, hands tense on the wheel.

Julian was awake.

And Luke didn’t know what he would find when he got there.

But this time — he wasn't going to run.

—

Julian had woken from his nap just as the sun began to dip behind the hospital's west wing, casting long streaks of orange across his room.

He didn't feel pain anymore — not in the way he had before.

Now it was a dull echo.
A soreness that lived deeper than the wounds.
A kind of ache that belonged to awakening — not just in body, but in soul.

He sat upright with help, pillows propped behind him, and turned his gaze toward the window.

Outside, he could see the crowds.

A small gathering at first glance — but as his eyes adjusted, he realized just how many there were. News vans lined the curb. Protest signs bobbed above the crowd. People knelt in circles holding candles, holding pictures.

His picture.

He watched as a woman cried on camera. A man in a church collar spoke quietly into a microphone. A child taped a paper heart to the hospital gate.

Julian's hand trembled slightly as he reached for his water, mind slowly stitching it all together.

Something had happened.

Something bigger than him.

———

He didn't hear the door open.

Only a quiet voice behind him:

“They’re all here for you.”

Julian froze.

He knew the voice — too well.
Even now, it curled something tight in his chest.

He turned slowly, his face unreadable.

Luke stood just inside the doorway.

No uniform.
No badge.
Just Luke — tired eyes, wind-swept hair, holding his cap in his hands like he wasn’t sure if he was welcome.

He didn’t rush forward.

Didn’t collapse into some cinematic embrace.

He just stood there.

Still.
Quiet.

Because he understood something Julian didn’t have to say:

The last time Julian was awake… he had every reason to believe Luke chose fear.

And Luke — finally — wasn’t going to pretend that didn’t matter.

———

Julian looked at him, not with anger, but with the kind of stillness that comes from someone who had already let something go.

Luke didn’t fill the silence.

He let it hang there — a kind of offering.

Julian turned back to the window for a moment, studying the lights, the candles, the noise that somehow held reverence.

Then, without looking at him, he asked:

"…How long have you known?"

Luke swallowed. "Today. A nurse texted me off the record."

Julian nodded, eyes still forward.

Another pause.

Then softer:
"You were the last person I saw before I blacked out."

Luke stepped forward once — not close, just enough to be fully seen.

"I know."

Julian turned toward him again — this time, eyes searching.

"There's a part of me…" he said, "that still remembers being thrown to the ground. The pain. The panic."

Luke's chest tightened.

Julian continued, "And in that moment — I didn't know the difference between you and Kyle."

Luke didn't flinch.

"I believe you," he said.

The room was still.

No defense.
No apology.
Just honesty.

Julian looked at Luke now — directly, no buffer.

His voice wasn't loud.
It didn't need to be.

It was sharp in the way only truth could be.

"Why did you hate me so much?"

Luke blinked.

The words hit like a backdraft — not because he hadn't expected anger, but because he didn't see that word coming.

Hate.

Luke opened his mouth — instinct told him to deny it.
To say I didn't.
To say That's not fair.

But he stopped.

Because Julian wasn't inventing this out of nowhere.

Julian's last conscious memory of him had been sharp-edged and cold.
Luke had cut him off. Pulled away. Put on the uniform of detachment like armor — and walked out.

And then came Kyle.

Same voice. Same tone. Same power.
Slamming Julian into the pavement like he was nothing.

Of course Julian confused the two.

Luke's silence had made space for that violence.
Not directly — but passively. Cowardly.

So Luke didn't defend himself.

He just stood there.
Hands still clasped around his cap, knuckles white.

———

Julian kept going.

“You saw me. You knew me. You knew things no one else knew. And then one day, you just…”

He paused, jaw tight.

“…acted like none of it was real.”

Luke’s breath was heavy now. But he stayed quiet.

Julian’s voice cracked as he pressed on.

“I could’ve taken it if you’d just ghosted me. But you didn’t even give me that. You turned cold. You looked at me like I was…”

His eyes welled.

“…something you regretted.”

Luke took a slow step forward — not to interrupt, not to close the gap, just to be closer to the pain.

Julian shook his head. “So when Kyle slammed me to the ground, when I felt that weight and heard that voice — it didn’t feel like a stranger. It felt like confirmation. Of what I always feared.”

He looked down at his hands.

“That I wasn’t worth choosing.”

———

Luke didn’t move.

He let the silence throb between them for a beat longer.

Then, slowly, with a voice frayed at the edges:

“I never hated you.”

He swallowed.

“I hated that I loved you.”

Julian looked up — eyes guarded.

Luke pressed on. “I hated how loving you made me question everything I had spent my whole life building. My place in the force. In church. In my family.”

His voice shook now, but he didn’t stop.

“You were a mirror I wasn’t ready to look into. And instead of facing myself, I ran. I hurt you because I didn’t know how to hold what I felt.”

He took one more step, now at the foot of the bed.

“I didn’t tackle you, Julian. But I didn’t stop it either. And that’s on me.”

Julian’s breathing was shallow, his eyes flicking between Luke and the window.

Luke let the weight settle, then added — quiet and firm:

“I was afraid of the world seeing me with you. But I’m not afraid anymore.”

—
Julian didn’t speak right away.

He looked at Luke — not like a lover, not like a stranger — but like someone trying to find the seam between what was real and what was remembered wrong.

His mind had built a defense — sharp, necessary.

It had said:
He hated you.

He left you because you were too much.
He didn't come back.

That narrative was clean.
Painful, yes — but survivable.

Because if Luke had hated him, Julian could close the book.

But now…

Now Luke stood there — open, steady, soft.

Not groveling. Not pushing.

Just letting the truth be spoken in full:

I was afraid.
But I never stopped loving you.

Julian's throat tightened.
Tears welled again, but they weren't angry now — they were letting go tears.

He closed his eyes, and in the dark behind his eyelids, the memory of being slammed to the ground flickered.

At first, Kyle's face.
Then — for a terrifying second — Luke's.

But now…
That face began to fade.

And in its place, he saw Luke in the aftermath.

Not armored.
Not postured.
Just there.

Kneeling by his body.
Screaming his name.
Hands trembling.

Staying.

Staying.

Julian exhaled.

He opened his eyes — slower this time. And when they met Luke's, they didn't hold that same caution.

"I thought you were him," Julian whispered.

Luke stepped closer, voice barely audible. "I know."

"But you weren't."

Luke shook his head. "No."

Julian looked down at his own fingers, still scarred from the IVs and tape.

"My mind tried to protect me. It rewrote things so I didn't have to feel the full weight of what I lost."

Luke nodded. "That's what minds do."

Julian looked up again.

And this time, he didn't resist.

———

Luke reached forward, slow and reverent — no urgency, no assumption.

His hand brushed gently against Julian's cheek, the rough pad of his thumb trailing under one eye, wiping away a tear that hadn't yet fallen.

Julian leaned into it.

It wasn't forgiveness.
It wasn't reconciliation.
Not yet.

But it was truth.

A truth that neither of them had been ready to hold two weeks ago.

Luke let his hand linger — cupping the side of Julian's face like it was something sacred.
Like he'd never take the gift of that closeness for granted again.

Julian closed his eyes.

And for a moment — just a breath — they sat there in the silence together.

No crowd.
No protest.
No trauma trying to rewrite the story.

Just them.

—

Luke's thumb moved gently across Julian's cheek, and his hand rested at the side of his face — tender, grounding.

For Luke, the gesture came naturally.

He had done this before.
So many times.

In the stillness of ICU nights, when the monitors were the only voices in the room, Luke had sat beside Julian's bed with his hand resting lightly on his arm, sometimes brushing stray strands of hair from his forehead.
Sometimes whispering things he didn't have the courage to say aloud when Julian was awake.

He had memorized the contours of his stillness.

He had loved him in silence, in waiting, in the absence of response.

So now — standing at his bedside, touching him with reverence — it was an extension of what had already lived inside him.

But for Julian…

For Julian, it felt like being touched for the first time.

Not in the physical sense — they had been intimate, close, even tender before.

But this was different.

This wasn't lust.
Or secrecy.
Or need.

This was care — offered without condition, without shame.

And it shook something loose in him.

———

He leaned ever so slightly into Luke's hand, not even consciously. His body moved before his mind caught up.

And when it did, the thought surprised him:

No one's ever held me like this without wanting to fix me.

Not like a project.
Not like a mirror.
Just like a person.

It almost made him flinch — not because it hurt, but because it was so new.

His breath hitched, and he opened his eyes again.

Luke didn't pull away.

Julian studied him — the way his brow was still slightly furrowed, how his eyes were glassy but unflinching.

"Did you do this… when I was out?" Julian asked, voice quiet.

Luke nodded. "Every day."

Julian looked down.

And for the first time in days, maybe weeks, he let himself feel something without trying to analyze it, control it, or earn it.

Just feel it.

And what rose to the surface was not guilt, or fear, or even confusion.

It was grief — soft, quiet grief for all the years he hadn't been held like this.

All the times he had to be the strong one. The understanding one. The safe space.

And now, here he was — broken, confused, unshaven and sore — being held anyway.

It made his chest hurt in a different way.

But it was the kind of hurt he could surrender to.

———

Julian looked up at Luke again, and this time his voice cracked just slightly.

"This feels new."

Luke tilted his head, brows knitting.

"This?"

Julian nodded, eyes wet.

"Being seen… without disappearing."

Luke didn't respond right away. He just tightened his hand slightly — not to grip, but to anchor.

"I'm here," he said. "I see you."

And for once, Julian didn't brace for the moment after.

The one where people usually flinch.

He just breathed.

And stayed.

—

The days blurred together — not in chaos, but in slow healing.

The pain in Julian's chest ebbed to a dull throb.
He began eating again, first broths, then bites of tamales smuggled in by his mother.
He took his first walk with a physical therapist, IV stand rolling beside him, Luke's steady hand hovering behind his back like a shadow he could lean on if he faltered.

Luke never missed a day.

He came in before or after his shifts, sometimes on-call, sometimes off-duty.

Sometimes he brought Julian silly things — crossword books, a radio, a magazine with a trashy headline they mocked together.

Other times, he brought silence — just his presence. Steady. Gentle. Unapologetically there.

For Julian, it was still new — this being loved in the open.

But he let himself adjust.
Let himself believe it.

And Luke, for the first time in his life, didn't need rules to tell him how to show up.
He just did.

———

It was a few days later, mid-morning.

Julian was sitting upright in bed, sketching absently on the back of a discharge paper with the pen a nurse had left behind.

Luke sat by the window, flipping through channels, avoiding the news.

Then—he said it.

Out of nowhere.

“Have you decided if you’re pressing charges?”

Julian stopped sketching.

He didn’t look up.

A long silence followed.

Luke turned toward him. “I mean… that’s what happens. Right? She shot you. Twice.”

Still no answer.

Luke sat forward, elbows on knees. “Julian—people don’t walk away from something like that.”

Julian finally looked up, calm but clear.

“I don’t want to press charges.”

Luke blinked.

“What?”

“I don’t want her locked up.”

Luke’s voice grew sharper. “Are you serious?”

Julian nodded once, slow.

Luke stood now, pacing. His jaw clenched, his voice tightening with

every word.

“She almost killed you. You nearly died. We had to pull your body off the ground and—”

“I know what happened,” Julian said quietly.

Luke stared at him. “Then why the hell are you acting like she deserves mercy?”

Julian sat up straighter.

“I’m not giving her mercy. I’m giving her space. To be seen. To be held accountable in a way that might actually change something.”

Luke scoffed. “That’s not justice.”

Julian held his gaze.

“No, that’s not punishment. There’s a difference.”

———

Luke turned away, hand running through his hair. He looked like the walls were closing in.

“I’m a cop, Julian. There are rules. People commit violence — they face consequences.”

“I’m not saying she shouldn’t face consequences,” Julian said gently. “I’m saying I don’t believe in handing her over to a system that doesn’t heal anything.”

Luke turned back, exasperated. “So what then? You let her go?”

“No. I face her. When I’m ready. I let her face herself. That’s the only justice that changes people.”

Luke’s voice cracked with something deeper now — not anger, but fear.

“You think she’ll feel that? You think she wants to be better?”

“I don’t know,” Julian replied. “But I know what happens when you throw broken people into cages and expect them to come out whole.”

Luke stared.

Julian pressed on — slower now, each word deliberate.

“Revenge has dressed itself up in the language of justice for so long that we stopped noticing the teeth beneath the robe.”

Silence.

Julian’s voice softened.

“Justice isn’t about making people pay. It’s about making people see. Making them feel. It’s about restoring what can be restored — not destroying more in the name of balance.”

Luke sat back down, his hands limp in his lap.

He looked… undone.

Julian watched him — not with triumph, but with tenderness.

“I know this shakes your world,” he said. “You were taught justice was a gavel. But I think justice might be a mirror.”

Luke swallowed hard.

And for once, didn’t argue.

—

Julian had been offering space, compassion, and clarity to everyone around him — especially Rae.

He’d told Luke he didn’t want to press charges.
He’d spoken about restorative justice.
He’d shown the world what it means to walk through pain without picking up a weapon.

But what he hadn't done — was visit Rae.

And more than that—

He hadn't let anyone tell her he forgave her.

Not the nurses. Not his parents. Not even Luke.

When the therapist brought it up — "Would you like her to know you're not pressing charges?" — Julian answered with a quiet shrug and a dismissive "She'll find out eventually."

Not out of strategy.

But because… he wanted her to feel the silence.

He didn't want revenge.

But in some corner of his heart — the still-bruised part — he wanted her to wonder.

To sit in the dark.
To not know if she was hated or forgiven.
To think about what it felt like to be invisible, feared, misunderstood — the way she had made him feel when she pulled the trigger.

And he told himself it was neutral.

But it wasn't.

It was withholding.

A passive way to keep some of the power.
Not in fire, but in frost.

And he knew it.

And when Luke gently brought it up one day — "Do you think she should know?" — Julian snapped in a way he hadn't before.

"She didn't give me that clarity before she shot me."

It was the first time bitterness cracked through the calm.

Luke didn't press.

And later, Julian sat with it.
Not proud.
Not ashamed.

Just aware that even in his attempt to stay soft…
he'd chosen silence as a weapon.

And maybe, he thought, that was part of being human too.

—

It was strange, Julian thought, how forgiving Rae came easier than trusting Luke.

He sat alone in his hospital room that night, bathed in the soft blue of the monitor lights, staring at the quiet outline of the chair Luke usually sat in.

Empty now. He'd gone to grab dinner.

And still—Julian couldn't shake the feeling that any minute now, he just wouldn't come back.

Not because Luke hadn't shown up.

He had.

Every day. Every morning. Every silence.

He brought him water, fluffed his pillows, made bad jokes, held his hand when the nightmares came. He did everything right.

But that was the problem.

It felt too right.

Too steady.
Too good.
Too dangerous.

Julian had lived a life where love came with conditions.
Where people showed up only until they had to choose between you and the world.

And they always chose the world.

———

Luke told him, “I’m here.”
And Julian nodded.
Smiled.
Let the words sit.

But he didn’t let them in.

Because deep down, part of him believed that Luke’s love — this love — would vanish the moment he leaned into it.

That if he relaxed too much, trusted too fully, it would slip from his hands like everything else.

He had walked into bullets without blinking.
Held broken people without judgment.

But this?

Being loved fully?

This was terrifying.

Because it asked something deeper than compassion.

It asked him to believe that he was worth staying for.

And he didn’t know how to do that yet.

———

“The Quiet Withdrawal”

He started to pull back in small ways.

Smiling less. Speaking more carefully.
Not asking Luke to stay when visiting hours ended.

He told himself it was because he needed rest.

But really, he was testing something.

Will he notice I'm retreating?
Will he leave if I don't pull him close?
Will he give up again?

It was subtle — a wounded form of control.

Not anger.
Not distance.
Just… hesitation.

The kind that grows out of a fear that maybe your greatest heartbreak is still on its way.

———

When Luke returned with takeout and found Julian staring blankly out the window, not speaking, not reaching—

He knew.

Not in an intellectual way.
But in his gut.

Julian wasn't angry.

He was afraid.

Not of Luke's violence.

But of his gentleness.

Because if Luke was serious — if he truly stayed — then Julian would have to let go of the armor he'd worn since childhood.

He'd have to let someone choose him without auditioning for it.

And that… felt like the most dangerous thing in the world.

—

Luke closed the door softly behind him.

Julian didn't turn.

He sat still, posture a little too upright, gaze lost in the blurred lights outside his hospital window.

The takeout bag rustled in Luke's hand. He set it on the counter without a word.

He knew this version of silence.

Not the peaceful kind.
Not the comfortable quiet they'd shared a dozen times in the last week.

This silence was laced with tension.
Subtle distance.
Like Julian had slowly stepped just behind a glass wall, and Luke had no idea how thick it was — or if he was even allowed to knock.

He moved closer — not into Julian's space, just enough to be present.

"You hungry?"

Julian's answer was soft, automatic. "A little."

But his voice didn't meet Luke's eyes.

Luke pulled up the chair.

Sat down. Not across. Beside.
But still — not too close.

He opened the takeout quietly, laying out the utensils between them. He let the moment breathe. Let Julian be.

And then, with gentle clarity, Luke said:

“You don’t have to pretend you’re okay with me.”

Julian stiffened slightly.

Still didn’t look at him.

Luke didn’t fill the silence. He wasn’t fishing for reassurance. Just… naming the room.

“I’ve noticed it,” he continued, not accusing, not dramatic. “You’re pulling back.”

Julian’s lips parted, but no words came out.

Luke nodded slowly.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to explain it.”

Now Julian turned — not all the way, but enough for their eyes to meet.

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” Julian said, almost apologetically.

“I know,” Luke replied. “And I’m not trying to fix it.”

Julian looked at him fully now — surprised.

Because he’d expected… something else.

Reassurance.
A speech.
A plea for closeness.

But Luke just sat there.

Still.
Warm.
Steady.

———

“I used to think,” Luke said after a pause, “that if I could just prove it enough, say the right things, show up the right way, I could earn your trust back.”

He breathed out through his nose.

“But that’s not how it works.”

He looked up at Julian.

“Your trust isn’t something I earn. It’s something you decide to give. When you’re ready.”

Julian’s throat tightened.

Luke continued, softer now. “So I’m not gonna push. I’m not gonna rush it. I’ll just be here.”

He smiled — a tired, true smile.

“Because the only way to undo what I broke… is to stay.”

———

Julian didn’t say anything at first.

His hands rested on the blanket, unmoving. But something inside him — something deep — exhaled.

Because that was it.

That was the wound.

Everyone else had made love a transaction.
Conditional.
Earned.
Proven.

But Luke…
Luke wasn’t asking for a receipt.

He was just sitting there.

And staying.

And for now, that was enough.

“The Turning Inward”

Julian watched Luke quietly pick at his food, not making a show of anything. Not watching him, not waiting for affirmation.

Just… there.

And something softened in Julian’s chest.

Not all at once.

But like the first unfreezing of a wintered-over river — edges melting, the water beneath starting to move again.

———

He turned his gaze back to the window, but now it reflected something different.

Not just the crowds. Not the media noise.

But Luke.

His posture.

His steadiness.

His decision not to rush in, not to beg, not to soothe his own guilt through Julian’s forgiveness.

Julian breathed in slow.

This… is new.

He always thought trust had to feel like certainty.

That to trust someone meant to blindly believe they'd never hurt you again. That they'd never leave. Never choose fear.

And if you couldn't believe that, then you couldn't trust.

But now — in this soft, aching moment — Julian realized how false that was.

———

Blind trust isn't trust at all, he thought.

Because blind trust is already writing the ending.

It assumes safety.

Just like refusing to trust is writing the ending, too —
But with fear instead of hope.

Both are predictions.
Both are forms of control.

But real trust?

Real trust is now.

It's letting go of the need to be right about the future.

It's saying, I love you. And I'm going to choose to believe in this moment — not because I know you'll stay, but because I know I'm here.

Trust, he realized, wasn't about Luke.

It was about him.

It was about owning his love — choosing it, not offering it like a test or withholding it like a punishment.

It was the courage to give something freely and to stay soft even if it broke.

Because that's what made it powerful.

Trust is not gambling with hope.
It's honoring love, regardless of return.

———

Julian turned to Luke.

He didn't say anything.
Didn't name the realization out loud.

But he shifted just slightly — leaned his shoulder a little closer to Luke's.

Not enough to be obvious.
But enough to be felt.

Luke didn't look at him.
But Julian saw the corner of his mouth twitch — the beginnings of a quiet smile.

And for the first time, Julian let the warmth settle in without pushing it away.

He was still afraid.
But fear was no longer the gatekeeper.

He was choosing.

One breath at a time.

—

Julian's gait had returned.

He walked without assistance now — slower than before, but steady. Intentional. The kind of pace that doesn't apologize for having once broken.

He'd been discharged a few weeks earlier. The hospital room that had once become his second skin was now a memory.

Life was quiet again.

Quieter than he expected.

Not void of meaning — just… his.

He spent mornings with Efraín, painting or cooking or listening to music without lyrics. Afternoons were therapy, both physical and emotional. Evenings were Luke — sometimes wrapped around him on the couch, sometimes reading across the room while Julian watered his plants.

And they were dating now. For real.

No secrets. No hiding. No doors half-closed.

It was fragile.
It was honest.
It was good.

———

Then came the email.

A polite, curated request from a journalist with a recognizable name.

"We'd love to sit down with you, Julian. To hear your side. Not just about the shooting — but about what happened after."

Julian stared at the message for a long time.

Luke found him standing at the kitchen island, hands braced on the counter, brows drawn tight.

"What's that look?"

Julian turned the phone around.

Luke read it in silence, then looked up.

“You gonna do it?”

Julian scoffed. “No.”

Luke waited.

Julian kept going. “It’s not just telling the story again. It’s telling it through them. Through their questions. Through their framing. Through people who want a clean arc and a strong close.”

He shook his head. “I finally feel like I’m healing. Why would I reopen all that in a room I don’t control? Surrounded by strangers who will edit my pain into digestible soundbites?”

Luke crossed his arms, leaning against the fridge.

“I get that.”

Julian nodded, relieved. “Good.”

“But,” Luke added, “is that really why you don’t want to do it?”

Julian blinked. “What do you mean?”

Luke pushed off the counter, stepping closer.

“I mean… are you protecting your peace? Or avoiding your power?”

Julian exhaled. He hated how well Luke could see through him now.

Luke’s voice softened. “I know you’re afraid it’ll be chaos. That it’ll dredge up every opinion, every comment section, every person who tried to use your pain for their narrative.”

Julian looked away.

Luke followed him with his eyes. “But you’ve walked into chaos before. Into bullets. Into silence. Into me. And every time, you chose courage.”

Julian's chest tightened.

Luke stepped even closer now.

"You don't owe the world your story. But if you want to tell it — not to defend yourself, not to control the noise, but to speak truth into the chaos — I believe you'll do it with the same grace you've done everything else."

Julian didn't answer right away.

He just stood there, heart pounding, eyes blurred with the weight of the decision.

Then he said quietly:

"It feels like the wound is healing. But doing this… it'd be like pulling the stitches out and walking into a dust storm."

Luke nodded.

"And yet," he said, placing a hand gently on Julian's back, "you've always been the kind of person who walks through the storm… and brings calm with you."

—

The next morning, before heading to the studio were the interview was being held, Julian sat in front of the mirror in his room.

No bandages anymore.

Just the faint web of a scar near his collarbone. A whisper of what he carried.

He practiced his breathing.
Closed his eyes.
Inhaled for four counts, held it, then released.

It helped a little.

But the nervousness didn’t go away.

He whispered a mantra a therapist had given him: “This moment doesn’t define me. I define it.”

Still, the knot in his stomach remained.

That familiar ache — the kind that once preceded hospital doors, bullets, heartbreak.

———

He opened his eyes and looked at himself again.

And then he remembered something a speaker once said at a community event:

“Excitement and nervousness are the same energy. Just different stories.”

The words landed differently today.

He stared at himself and thought:

What if I stopped trying to fix it?
What if I didn’t breathe this feeling away?
What if I listened to it?

And so he did.

He let the nervousness rise.

The shaking hands. The fast heartbeat. The way his voice caught in his throat when he said her name in his head.

He didn’t resist it.

He sat with it.

This is the monster, he realized.
Not the enemy.

The guide.

The fear wasn't here to stop him.

It was here to walk beside him — into whatever came next.

And this next chapter… would begin by facing the only person left in the story he hadn't yet turned toward.

—

The studio wasn't what he expected.

Smaller. Quieter.

Almost too calm — like a theater before curtain.

The lights were already set.
Three of them — warm, directional, soft as sunrise.

A sound technician gave him a polite nod and clipped a mic to his shirt.

A makeup artist leaned in with a brush. "You'll barely notice it's there," she said. "Just to take the shine down."

The interviewer — a man with kind eyes and practiced posture — stood nearby making small talk.

Something about the weather.
Something about his drive in.
Something about how his niece saw Julian's photo on the news and drew a picture of "the brave man with soft eyes."

Julian laughed — awkwardly at first, then fully.
It helped. The ease of it. The gentleness.

But then—

One of the producers stepped forward and gave a two-finger countdown.

The lights shifted.

They didn't change, not really.
But suddenly, they meant something.

The soft murmur in the room stilled.
The casual chatter snapped into stillness.

And just like that—
The moment began.

Like the orchestra warming up one minute…
and a fully tuned overture the next.

Everything clicked into place.
The energy. The focus. The weight.

Julian took one last breath as the camera's red light blinked on.

No turning back.

Just the story.
The truth.
And him.

—

The first question hit hard, fast.

"You weren't trained. No experience with crisis negotiation. You weren't law enforcement. So why walk toward someone with a gun?"

Julian blinked.

The lights suddenly felt hotter.
The room smaller.
His throat, dry.

"I… I didn't really think—"

The interviewer pressed in, smooth but unrelenting.

“That’s exactly the concern, isn’t it? That you didn’t think?”

Julian’s mouth parted, but he couldn’t find the thread.

“You got shot. Twice. You survived — and that’s incredible. But what if someone else sees your story and thinks, ‘Maybe I can do that too.’ And they don’t make it?”

He wasn’t being malicious.

He was just… doing what the world does.

Look for the liability.

Distill the miracle into a warning label.

Julian shifted in his seat.

His hands trembled slightly, just out of frame.

The interviewer continued:

“There’s a fine line between bravery and recklessness. You may have crossed it and lived. But if your story inspires someone to cross that same line and die — is it still bravery? Or is it… something else?”

For a moment — a split second — Julian doubted.

He wondered if he had acted out of ego.
If deep down, there was a sliver of him that wanted to be seen.

Was he selfish? Stupid? Naive?

———

His mind raced.

The camera light stayed red.
The room had fallen silent except for the click of a pen from somewhere off-set.

Julian's voice came out thin:

"I didn't want to— I wasn't trying to be a hero."

The interviewer nodded, but didn't let go.

"So what were you trying to be?"

———

And that's when it happened.

Julian stopped.

Not speaking — thinking.

He stopped trying to justify the moment.

He stopped trying to win the question.

He stopped trying to make the story neat.

And instead — he let his truth rise.

His voice, steady now:

"I was trying to stop the chain."

The interviewer tilted his head.

"What chain?"

Julian responded

"The chain of pain. Fear. Reaction. We see violence, we respond with violence. We see chaos, we try to control it. I just… I saw someone hurting. And I didn't want to hurt her back."

He swallowed, breath catching just slightly.

"I wasn't calm. I wasn't wise. I was scared. But I also knew that if I didn't try something different, we'd just keep repeating the same play — but with different actors."

The room was still.

And now — even the interviewer leaned back.

Not defeated.

Just… undone.

Julian continued, softer now:

“I didn’t think I could fix her. But I thought… if she saw someone stay, maybe that would matter.”

He paused.

“I didn’t walk forward because I was brave. I walked forward because I was done letting fear do all the talking.”

And just as the quiet began to settle, the interviewer shifted gears — voice back to its sharper edge.

“But others did let fear do the talking. Officer Kyle McKinney is currently under investigation for excessive force. He claims he followed protocol, but many are saying he acted with aggression… even prejudice.”

Julian blinked, but didn’t interrupt.

The interviewer leaned in, more pointed now.

“Some say this proves the system’s broken. Others argue that Kyle did what any officer would’ve done — what he was trained to do. That if we question those actions, we threaten the entire structure. That dismantling the police force would create chaos.”

He let the statement hang.

A challenge.

A pressure point.

Julian took a breath.

This was the question that came for every story like his — the one that asked him to pick a side in a system designed to divide.

But Julian didn't play that game.

He never had.

———

"I don't want to see the police dismantled," Julian said. Calm. Clear. Direct.

"I want to see them decompressed."

The interviewer furrowed his brow.

Julian continued.

"People say Kyle is a bad apple. And he is. But we forget that bad apples don't grow in isolation — they grow in bad soil."

He leaned slightly forward now, his voice gaining quiet strength.

"There are good cops. Luke is a good cop. My boyfriend," he added, without hesitation. "He shows up with compassion. He deescalates with empathy. He listens."

A soft murmur in the control room, just out of sight.

Julian didn't pause.

"But even he — even the best of them — are forced to live in a system that tells them: 'Go face life-or-death calls, and then thirty minutes later, go write a ticket for expired plates.'"

He looked directly into the camera.

"We train officers to keep order, but we don't train them to process trauma. They carry it in their bodies. All of it. The fear, the threats, the adrenaline. Day after day. And there's no decompression. No space to feel. Just armor on top of armor, shift after shift."

His voice lowered.

“And the body keeps the force. Whether they want it to or not.”

———

The interviewer sat still, eyebrows slightly raised — not in challenge now, but surprise.

Julian continued:

“The solution isn’t to defund the police. The solution is to defund the culture that keeps officers from being human.”

Another pause.

“To stop rewarding toughness and silence. To create a system where vulnerability isn’t weakness — it’s prevention.”

He exhaled.

“I don’t want less public safety. I want more public healing. And that starts with the people we ask to protect us being allowed to heal too.”

———

The room was quiet again.

No buzz this time.

Just stillness.

The interviewer, no longer holding a script, simply said:

“Thank you.”

Julian nodded.

And for the first time, the camera light didn’t feel like pressure.

It felt like illumination.

The interviewer glanced at his notes again, his voice softer now. Less testing. Less edged.

“You mentioned earlier that you haven’t spoken to Rae.”

Julian nodded once. “No.”

There was no malice in his voice.

But no warmth either.

Just… stillness. A quiet, settled space that no longer flinched when her name was spoken.

The interviewer continued:

“Have you wanted to?”

Julian looked away for the first time in minutes.

He considered it.

Not as a performance — not for the camera — but as a real question.

“I’ve thought about it,” he admitted. “But… I don’t know what I’d say. I’m not angry. But I’m not trying to make peace either.”

The interviewer nodded. “Understandable.”

He flipped to the final page of his notes.

“I want to read something,” he said, almost hesitantly. “We got permission to include a portion of Rae’s intake evaluation. You can ask us to cut this later if you’d like.”

Julian tensed — subtly.

The interviewer began reading:

“Subject was raised in the foster care system. Multiple placements. First reported physical abuse at age seven. Sexual abuse by a foster brother at age nine. Reports indicate she ran away four times before

the age of thirteen. Diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder at fourteen. Multiple suicide attempts between fifteen and seventeen. No stable guardian relationship on record. Expresses intense feelings of betrayal, shame, and self-loathing. Subject stated: 'I wanted to aim it at the world before it swallowed me whole.'"

The words landed like quiet thunder.

Not dramatic.

Just devastating.

Julian didn't look up.

His fingers clenched faintly on the armrest.

———

The interviewer folded the paper and placed it gently beside him.

He didn't follow up.

Didn't press.

Julian sat in the silence.

And slowly, the ache returned.

Not pity.
Not guilt.
Not clarity.

But the same ache he'd felt that day.

The one that pulled him forward through blood and bullets.

The one that said:

This person isn't a monster.
They're a wound walking through the world without bandages.

His throat tightened.

Because it would've been easier to stay indifferent.
To say that chapter is closed.
To stay on his side of healing.

But something in him whispered:
You're not done yet.

———

The interviewer began his closing statement.

Thanked him for his time.

Talked about courage and public narratives and the importance of stories like Julian's.

But Julian barely heard it.

Because something inside him had already shifted again.

When the cameras cut and the red light blinked off, the interviewer leaned forward with a smile.

"Anything else you'd like to say?"

Julian sat up straighter. Looked him in the eyes.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I think… I need to see her."

—

The car was warm from the sun, humming gently beneath them as they pulled out of the studio lot.

Julian sat in the passenger seat, hands still clasped in his lap, the edges of adrenaline just beginning to fade.

Luke glanced over, his face lit with something between awe and affection.

“You did good,” he said.

Julian exhaled. “I don’t know. I think I rambled.”

“You rambled,” Luke nodded, “like someone who meant every damn word.”

Julian smiled, barely. “You sure you’re not just biased?”

Luke kept his eyes on the road. “I’m in love, not delusional.”

That got a real laugh.

They drove in silence for a moment. Not uncomfortable — just full.

Then Julian cleared his throat.

“So…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Was it okay? That I said you were my boyfriend?”

Luke looked at him sideways, brow furrowed like the question was absurd.

“Jules. I wanted to kiss you through the screen.”

Julian flushed.

Luke continued, voice softer now. “I’ve never been prouder to be known. To be yours.”

Julian let that sit. Let it land.

And for a minute, everything was light.

But then — like a thread tugging on the edge of the peace — Julian’s expression shifted.

He turned toward Luke slightly, voice quiet again.

“Hey… can I ask you something kind of weird?”

Luke grinned. “Those are your specialty.”

Julian smirked, then looked out the window for a second.

“Do you know… if there’s a way I could see Rae?”

Luke’s smile faded, not in discomfort, but in gravity.

“You mean like… legally?”

Julian nodded. “Yeah. I figured you’d know better than me. I don’t want to cause trouble. But… I think I need to see her.”

Luke took a breath.

“She’s in a psych facility, last I heard. Technically, under legal watch until her evaluation’s done. But…” he glanced over, “if she consents, and if her doctors clear it, you could.”

Julian nodded slowly.

“I’m not looking to have a moment. Or… closure. I just think…”

He trailed off.

Luke finished for him. “You’re not done loving the part of her that broke.”

Julian looked over, eyes soft. “Yeah.”

Luke nodded once, eyes returning to the road.

“I’ll make some calls.”

—

The house was quiet.

Luke had gone home for the night, and Efraín was already asleep, soft music humming from the other room.

Julian stood in the kitchen, sipping tea, unsure what to do with the silence.

Then—

“Couldn’t sleep either?”

He turned.

His mama stood in the doorway, shawl draped over her shoulders, hair loosely tied back. Her eyes, always a little tired now, held that look he’d seen since childhood — the kind that knew more than it said.

He smiled. “Just thinking.”

She stepped in, sat down at the table. “About the girl?”

Julian nodded, slowly.

His mama didn’t rush him. Just sat.

Then she said, almost absently, “You remind me of my father.”

Julian blinked. “Abuelito?”

She smiled faintly. “Not in how he spoke. But how he stood still with pain. He didn’t always know what to do with it. But he never let it change him.”

Julian nodded softly, waiting.

Then her voice shifted — lower now, rougher.

“You know… I’ve never told you why I came to this country.”

Julian straightened slightly.

His mama looked down at her hands.

“I wasn’t running toward a dream. I was running away from someone.”

She paused, then said it plainly:

“My uncle.”

Julian froze.

She didn’t look up. Just kept tracing invisible circles into the table.

“He started when I was twelve. Every week. Sometimes more. No one believed me. Or… they believed me but didn’t care. You were either a virgin or you were ruined. That’s how they saw it.”

Her voice was steady. As if she had said this to herself enough times that the words had worn down into manageable weight.

“I stayed quiet for a long time. Until one day — we were working in the field. He followed me behind the shed like always.”

Her fingers curled lightly.

“There was a pickaxe leaning against the wall. And I—I didn’t plan it, mijo. I didn’t think. I just… swung.”

Julian’s breath caught.

She swallowed. “It hit his face. Blinded him in one eye. I ran.”

A long silence settled between them.

“I’ve lived with that ever since,” she said, barely above a whisper. “Even now, I ask myself… was it survival? Or was it revenge?”

Julian reached for her hand, gently.

“I’m sorry you went through that.”

His mama nodded, blinking fast.

“I watch what you did that day. I watch how you stepped forward with nothing but open hands. And I feel so proud. But also—so guilty. Because I used violence. And you used love.”

Julian squeezed her hand.

“But, mamá… you had to survive. You did what no one else did.

You stopped him."

She looked at him now — the ache in her eyes like an ocean held back.

"You always knew who you were," she said. "Even as a boy. And when you came out in college, I wasn't surprised. I was just… afraid. Not of you, but for you."

Julian's eyes glistened.

"I knew what the world would do to someone soft. Someone honest. I thought—maybe if I prayed hard enough, God would change you. Not because I wanted him to. But because I didn't want you to suffer."

Julian nodded slowly.

"But when you came out, it wasn't a rebellion. It wasn't even pride. It was… surrender. You said, 'This is me. And if it breaks something, then so be it.' That's what scared me most."

Tears slipped down her cheeks now.

"Because it made the suffering real. And I didn't want you to carry more than you already would."

Julian's voice was soft, but unwavering.

"Mamá… you did the best you could with what you had."

She looked at him, and for the first time in years — really cried.

"And I'm proud of you," Julian continued. "Not because you were perfect. But because you didn't let the abuse go on. You broke the cycle. You gave me a childhood without monsters."

He paused, breathing in deeply.

"And what I did… that day with Rae… that wasn't just me."

He smiled now, through tears.

"That was you, too. The part of you that swung the pickaxe — but

this time, with open hands. You passed me your bravery. And because of you, I had the space to become the version of you that never got to be whole."

His mother covered her mouth, weeping openly now.

Julian stood, walked over, and pulled her into his arms.

And there — in the kitchen, lit only by moonlight and memory — two generations held the weight of what had been carried… and what had finally been released.

—

Julian's house was filled with music and the smell of fresh tortillas.

Laughter danced in the corners of every room. Efraín was humming along with a mariachi song on the stereo. Julian's mama was passing around plates with a gleam in her eye and a story on her lips. Colton, surprisingly comfortable, was sipping horchata while trying to follow her Spanish.

Luke sat beside Julian on the couch, arm draped casually over his shoulder. They weren't hiding. Not anymore. Julian's smile was easy, soft, radiant — the kind of joy that came from being celebrated, not just survived.

It was his birthday.

And for the first time in a long time, he felt alive.

———

But there were two faces missing.

Luke's parents.

They had been invited. Kindly. Openly.

But they hadn't come.

Still processing, they said.

Luke had pretended to shrug it off. Told Julian not to worry. That it was about them, not him.

But inside — it hurt.

Not just the absence. The delay.

How long did it take to process love?

———

Luke stepped outside after cake, needing air.

The warm night greeted him — cicadas singing in the trees, the faint clinking of plates behind the open kitchen window.

Sarah, his older sister, was already out there, leaning on the porch railing, sipping something cold.

She turned and smiled. “Your man knows how to throw a party.”

Luke chuckled. “Yeah. It’s… it’s different, right?”

“Different,” she said, “and better.” She nudged his shoulder. “I haven’t had food this good in years.”

They stood in companionable silence for a beat, until Sarah’s voice dropped just slightly.

“You okay?”

Luke exhaled. “Yeah. Just wish Mom and Dad could’ve seen it. Him. All of this.”

Sarah nodded. “I know.”

Luke’s voice tightened. “It’s like… how much time do they need? It’s not like they didn’t know. They’ve always known. And still they need more time to adjust?”

He paused.

“Sometimes I want to just shake them. Be like—Look. He’s good. He’s kind. He makes me feel safe. Why is that so hard to accept?”

Sarah looked at him, kind but unwavering.

“Because epiphanies don’t come with clocks.”

Luke frowned.

“You had yours. But that doesn’t mean they’re on the same page — or that they can jump to it just because you’re ready.”

He looked away.

She continued, gently but firm:

“You wrestled with this for years, Luke. In secret. You buried it under jokes and football and Bible study and silence.”

He flinched. Because it was true.

“And now you’ve come out the other side — healed, open, in love. And I am so proud of you. But you can’t demand your parents show up at your finish line when they haven’t even figured out how to step onto the track.”

Luke sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

Sarah turned toward him.

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t be upset. Or disappointed. You’re allowed that. But don’t mistake their slowness for rejection. This isn’t them turning away. It’s them turning through.”

Luke’s voice was tight. “I just want to fix it.”

“I know,” she said. “But beating them over the head with your truth is just their tactic in reverse. It’s not compassion. It’s war. And you don’t win a war like this. You just extend it.”

Luke looked at her, finally letting his walls down.

“What do I do then?”

Sarah smiled, soft and certain.

“You do what Julian did. You stay open. You make space. You show up with presence, not punishment.”

She squeezed his arm.

“Don’t become what you’re trying to heal.”

—

Julian had spent the rest of his birthday wrapped in warmth.

Stories. Music. A sense of belonging that didn’t need to be explained. When he left, his mother hugged him tighter than usual, whispering in Spanish, “Hoy fue un buen día.”

It was.

And now — hours later — he stood barefoot in Luke’s apartment, watching city lights blink through the window.

Luke was behind him, arms loosely around his waist, forehead resting between his shoulder blades.

They didn’t say much.

They didn’t need to.

They kissed slow.
Undressed slow.
Moved slow.

And when they finally came together, it wasn’t about desire.

It was about belonging.

It was nice.

It was real.

It was theirs.

———

Afterward, they lay tangled in sheets, skin still warm, breaths syncing.

Julian's head rested on Luke's chest, his fingers tracing lazy shapes on his shoulder.

For a while, all was quiet — except for the city, and the hum of the air conditioner, and the pulse of something good.

Then Luke cleared his throat softly.

"There's… one more thing."

Julian looked up. "Uh-oh."

Luke gave a small, crooked smile.

"I didn't say it earlier because I didn't want to… I don't know. Ruin the vibe."

Julian propped himself on one elbow, curious now.

Luke hesitated.

Then:

"I got a call this morning."

Julian's breath stilled — not in fear, but in knowing.

Luke nodded slowly.

"She said yes. Rae. She wants to meet."

The words settled like a stone dropped in still water.

No shock.
No flinch.

Just ripples.

Julian stared at the ceiling for a moment, then looked down at Luke — not with panic, but with something quieter.

Something like readiness.

He didn't say anything yet.

He just exhaled.

And let the weight of that truth press into his chest — not as a threat, but a turning point.

Because now…
it was time.

—

Julian sat alone in a molded plastic chair bolted to the floor, hands resting in his lap.

There was no window.
No clock.
Just a single humming fluorescent light above him — slightly flickering, like it had grown tired of its own purpose.

The air was stale. Processed.
It didn't move.
Didn't carry scent or warmth or anything resembling life.

He looked around — blank cinderblock walls, peeling paint, a dull steel table between him and the other chair, still empty.

Everything in the room had edges. Everything was made to withstand impact.

But nothing here was built for healing.

No color.
No softness.
No sunlight.

He noticed the absence more than the presence.

The absence of light.
The absence of air.
The absence of any invitation to breathe.

Two of the simplest things that help a person heal, he thought.

And yet here — they were withheld. Like luxuries.

He leaned back against the cold plastic and let the quiet hum of the room settle over him.

This isn't a space for change, he realized.
It's a space for holding. For forgetting.

It wasn't just the walls that confined.
It was the system that built them — not with hope, but with fear.

Fear that wounds couldn't be healed, only hidden.
Fear that people couldn't change, only be managed.
Fear that if we opened the door too wide, something dangerous might slip through — and so we never open it at all.

Julian sat still.

Not afraid.
But aware.

He was sitting in the architecture of fear.

And yet — he was not of it.

He had not come to demand penance.

He had come to look the wound in the eye.
"The Return"

The door buzzed.

A mechanical clunk echoed through the concrete walls.

Julian didn't stand.

He simply looked up — eyes steady, breath still.

Rae entered with two guards. One stayed just outside the door. The other waited for her to sit.

She didn't look at Julian at first. Just walked in like she was dragging the air behind her. Shoulders squared, jaw set, body stiff in that familiar armor — the kind that made her look larger than she was.

The chair screeched as she pulled it back and sat down across from him.

No greeting.
No acknowledgment.

Just her eyes — half-lidded, sharp, already bracing for whatever she thought he was here to say.

Julian studied her quietly.

The same tension in her brow.
The same jaw clenched against regret.
But something colder now.

Last time, she'd had a gun.

This time, she had the system.

And it had done what it does best.

It had hardened her again.

———

For a moment — just a moment — Julian felt the old instinct rising.

The one that stepped forward at the flea market.
The one that offered open arms.
That moved through pain like it was fog, not fire.

He almost leaned in.

Almost softened his voice.
Almost reached out.

Because it had worked before.

But something stopped him.

A flicker of memory.
A new understanding.

That version of Rae — the one who collapsed into his chest — she had surfaced because she saw something no one had given her before.

But this version?

She didn't need comfort.

She didn't trust it anymore.

Comfort now would sound like condescension.
Feel like control.

And love — real love — had no business being vague right now.

———

So Julian didn't soften.

He didn't reach.

He straightened his spine.
Met her gaze.
Held it without blinking.

And then, calmly — not cold, not warm — just clear:

"You don't have to talk."

Rae said nothing.

“But I’m going to.”

Still nothing.

Julian’s voice sharpened just slightly — not to hurt, but to wake her up.

“I’m not here to rescue you. That’s done. You’re not a crisis anymore.”

Her eyes flicked. Just a little. The first crack.

Julian leaned forward, arms resting on the table.

“You don’t scare me. Not now. Not then.”

She looked at him — finally. Really looked.

Julian nodded.

“I saw your pain that day. I saw the child in you. The fear. The fire. I still see it.”

He paused.

“But you’re not a child now.”

Silence.

“You’re a grown woman. You’ve survived things no one should have. But survival isn’t your whole story — unless you keep letting it be.”

Rae didn’t speak.

Her stare was hard. But it wavered.

Julian held the line.

“This system wants you numb. Wants you angry. Wants you unreachable.”

He narrowed his eyes, just slightly.

“Don’t give it what it wants.”

———

Rae looked away.

But her fingers — curled tightly in her lap — unclenched.

Julian stood, slow and steady.

He didn’t offer a hug.
Didn’t reach across the table.

He just said, with quiet fire:

“I didn’t come to save you, Rae. I came to see you.”

He took one step back.

“And I hope — when you’re ready — you’ll see yourself too.”

Then he turned, and walked toward the door.

Leaving behind no resolution.
No neat ending.

Just an opening.

—

Julian walked out of the prison with the same pace he walked in.

Measured.
Present.
Unflinching.

But something had shifted.

Not in Rae — at least not yet.
Not in the guards, or the sterile walls.

But in the air.

It felt cracked now.
Like he'd dropped something inside the room that couldn't be unseen.
Like the paint might peel faster.
Like the silence might echo longer than it used to.

Not loud.
Not violent.

But seismic.

Like he had just shaken the foundations of a place built to forget people.

And for a moment, he almost smiled.

———

As he passed the last checkpoint, badge returned, hands checked, the metal doors clanking shut behind him, a memory surfaced.

A misa he'd half-listened to as a child.

He didn't remember the sermon — not really.

But he remembered the story.

Jesus walking into the temple.
Seeing the vendors.
The coins.
The false piety.

And flipping the tables.

Not because he wanted to destroy something —
but because something holy had been hijacked.

Julian had always wondered about that moment.

Wasn’t it violence?

Wasn’t it anger?

But now — walking through the last gate and into the sun —
he understood it.

It wasn’t violence.
It was clarity.

A refusal to accept the infection as sacred.

It was compassion wielded like a flame.

A middle finger to the machine — not to burn it down in rage, but to reveal its emptiness.

And as Julian stepped into the light, the door clanking shut behind him, he didn’t feel weight.

He felt breath.

He didn’t save Rae.

He didn’t change the system.

But he stood inside it and didn’t let it change him.

—

The road stretched ahead, empty but golden, the sun folding itself gently into the horizon.

Julian drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on his thigh, the radio off. The hum of the engine filled the silence — steady, almost meditative.

His body felt light.

His chest, cracked open.

His breath, clean.
His mind — a storm of clarity.

He had done something today.
Something real.

And still—

There was no parade.
No shift in the wind.
No policy changed, no camera caught the moment his voice cut through steel and stone.

The prison was still standing.

Rae was still inside.

The guards still blinked blankly.
The walls still buzzed.

And slowly — inevitably — things would begin to return to their normal.

Like footprints in sand.

Moments of impact, softened by time.
Truths spoken, worn away by routine.
Eyes reopened, then quietly shut again.

———

A flicker of sadness rose in his chest.
Not despair — just ache.

Because he knew now — this wasn't a fight you win once.
It wasn't about fixing the system or reaching the summit.

It wasn't about converting the world into a gentler place, or loving people into agreement.

No—

It was about wholeness.

Julian took a slow breath and let it settle all the way to his belly.

The real work, he realized, was not reshaping life to avoid pain.

It wasn't about changing the government to match our comforts.
Or smoothing out every wrinkle in our relationships.

The invitation life gave — over and over again — was simpler than that.

To experience everything.
To let it all in.
And to remain whole anyway.

Joy and betrayal.
Anger and peace.
Guilt and grace.

To feel all of it.

And to still choose to love.

———

The city grew closer, familiar streets unfolding like pages he'd already read.

Julian's fingers tapped gently on the steering wheel, a soft rhythm rising in his chest — not tension, not even relief.

Something else.

Warmth.

He caught himself smiling, just a little.

Because waiting at the other end of this drive — past the lights, past the quiet, past everything he had just released —

was Luke.

And suddenly, all Julian wanted was to see his face.

To step into the house.

To kick off his shoes.
To feel arms wrap around him that didn’t need an explanation.

He wasn’t returning for comfort.

He was returning to continuity.

To something he had chosen.
And who had chosen him back.

———

And that was enough.
Enough to drive toward.
Enough to believe in.
Enough to begin again.
The End.